

## (DE)FORMATION JOURNEY IN THE ELIAS CANETTI AUTOBIOGRAPHY NARRATIVE<sup>1</sup>

### VIAGEM (DE)FORMATIVA NA NARRATIVA AUTOBIOGRÁFICA DE ELIAS CANETTI

### EL VIAJE (DE)FORMATIVO EM LA NARRATIVA AUTOBIOGRÁFICA DE ELIAS CANETTI

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**Abstract:** This article addresses the *Elias Canetti's* autobiography from a formative point of view searching for another meaning for the trip concept, *in which desire and pleasure* are not present, *as one would expect from a sightseeing tour or trekking*, but a journey that, involuntary and forcibly, crosses the individual, (de)forming them. Accordingly, the refuge, the escape, the self-exile, they relate a path of personal tragedies that gains other meanings when narrated. Elias Canetti's autobiographical narrative is divided in three volumes – “The tongue set free”, “The torch in my ear” and “The play of the eyes” – and tells us about the author's migratory routes across a Europe crumbling under wars and totalitarian regimes which arose in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. His testimony is an account of a world that catches a glimpse of totalitarian experiences and the *trivialization of evil* that marks the history of Western civilization. Elias Canetti's writings narrates *the roads he had to take* to avoid direct contact with the Great Wars, and exposes certain (de)formative aspects of migration, as well as how these experiences, so open to uncertainties and rid of any guaranties, appear before the eyes of a young man from a rich family, whose mother tried to protect from the perils of the world. This feature is one of many highlights, a sine qua non element in his stories, because that is where all the terror and pain lie for those who flee their homeland to venture into foreign lands in an almost instinctive attempt to survive. It is in this sense that we work the concept of (de)formation in its relation with the concept of journey.

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**Keywords:** Elias Canetti. Autobiography research. Journey. Migration.

**Resumo:** Este artigo aborda a autobiografia de Elias Canetti a partir de um ponto de vista formativo buscando outro significado para o conceito de viagem, no qual desejo e prazer não estão presentes, como seria de se esperar de um passeio turístico ou “mochilão”, mas uma

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viagem que, involuntária e forçada, atravessa o indivíduo, (de)formando-os. Assim, o refúgio, a fuga, o autoexílio relacionam um caminho de tragédias pessoais que ganha outros significados quando narrado. A narrativa autobiográfica de Elias Canetti está dividida em três volumes - "A língua absolvida", "Uma luz em meu ouvido" e "O jogo dos olhos" - e nos fala das rotas migratórias do autor através de uma Europa que se desmorona sob guerras e regimes totalitários que surgiram na primeira metade do século 20. Seu testemunho é um relato de um mundo que vislumbra as experiências totalitárias e a banalização do mal que marca a história da civilização ocidental. Os escritos de Elias Canetti narram os caminhos que ele teve que percorrer para evitar o contato direto com as Grandes Guerras, e expõe certos aspectos (de)formativos da migração, bem como estas experiências, tão abertas às incertezas e livres de quaisquer garantias, aparecem diante dos olhos de um jovem de uma família rica, cuja mãe tentou proteger dos perigos do mundo. Esta característica é um dos muitos destaques, um elemento *sine qua non* em suas histórias, porque é aí que reside todo o terror e dor para aqueles que fogem de sua pátria para se aventurarem em terras estrangeiras em uma tentativa quase instintiva de sobreviver. É neste sentido que trabalhamos o conceito de (de)formação em sua relação com o conceito de viagem.

**Palavras-chave:** Elias Canetti. Pesquisa Autobiográfica. Viagem. Migração.

**Resumen:** Este artículo aborda la autobiografía de Elias Canetti desde un punto de vista formativo buscando otro significado para el concepto de viaje, en el que no están presentes el deseo y el placer, como cabría esperar de una visita turística o de un trekking, sino un viaje que, involuntaria y forzosamente, atraviesa al individuo, (de)formándolo. Así, el refugio, la huida, el autoexilio, relatan un camino de tragedias personales que adquiere otros significados al ser narrado. La narración autobiográfica de Elias Canetti se divide en tres volúmenes - "La lengua absuelta", "La antorcha al oído" y "El juego de ojos"- y nos cuenta las rutas migratorias del autor a través de una Europa que se desmorona bajo las guerras y los regímenes totalitarios surgidos en la primera mitad del siglo XX. Su testimonio es el relato de un mundo que vislumbra las experiencias totalitarias y la banalización del mal que marca la historia de la civilización occidental. Los escritos de Elias Canetti narran los caminos que tuvo que tomar para evitar el contacto directo con las Grandes Guerras, y exponen ciertos aspectos (de)formativos de la migración, así como la forma en que estas experiencias, tan abiertas a las incertidumbres y desprovistas de toda garantía, aparecen ante los ojos de un joven de familia rica, cuya madre trató de proteger de los peligros del mundo. Este rasgo es uno de los más destacados, un elemento *sine qua non* en sus relatos, porque es ahí donde radica todo el terror y el dolor de quienes huyen de su tierra natal para aventurarse en tierras extranjeras en un intento casi instintivo de sobrevivir. Es en este sentido que trabajamos el concepto de (des)formación en su relación con el concepto de viaje.

**Palabras-clave:** Elias Canetti. Investigación autobiográfica. Viaje. Migración.

## Introduction

Travel narratives are confused with the very idea of Western literature, from Greek narratives, going through medieval troubadours, Chivalric romance, the reports of the early invaders of the «New World», as well as all the writings of travelers in the twentieth century,

the presence of the journey is perceived as frequent theme, sometimes the motto itself to define, from the thematic point of view, what should be narrated. When Homer told us about the wandering of his character Odysseus returning home after the Trojan War, he produced a text with fantastic features that eventually served as an ethical narrative model, determining for a long time what deserved to be said: if there was no journey, if there was no heroism, if there was no adventure better to keep the mundane story for family anecdote or for the process of historiographic documentation.

This literary ethic can be well observed in the history of Western narratives both in biographical texts and in stories fully identified as fiction, the journey when narrated has always been that gorgeousness, the unusual, the mythical encounter, the journey of transformation and the journey to the unknown: from Homer to Jack London, from *Marco Polo* to *Cabeza de Vaca*, from *The Song of the Nibelungs* to *Moby Dick*, there just seemed to be a place for stories that fled from the ordinary and thus also transported us beyond everyday trivialities.

Only more recently, in the period that literary historiography has come to call modernity, and with the rise of subjectivity as a narrative point of view, this representation begins to suffer some wear and tear. Benjamin (1989), reading Baudelaire, provokes us with the idea of the subject who contemplates the city, voyeuristically, in an act that apprehends and represents the urban crowd from a subjective point of view. This perspective, used by the German philosopher to criticize individualism in capitalist society, serves us well as a metaphor for another type of journey that has come to be - more often - from modernity, which is the journey that presents us urban panorama which wonder is no longer in the unexpected, in the mythological or in the contact with another "savage", but in the allegory, in the faces, in the culture, in the architecture and in all the details that make us know that we do not belong to that one place.

With the return of the author as a social actor in the contemporary biographical space (ARFUCH, 2010), his life has become an object of interest as much as his works. His interviews, comments and his trajectory became a complement to what he writes as a novel, short story, romance. This subjective turn gave the authors a space for performing representation, as well as an audience interested in reading their encounters, paths and love links. The autobiography gained in this space the status of premium genre (despite frequent competition with the interview, talk shows and other biographical modes), especially if understood as a dimension of life. «All these narratives intended and intend to establish the

place of a subject in a social spectrum, allowing him to identify himself in this world in a society and allowing his readers - when they reach these texts – to locate the history of a time through the optics of a subject» (MATOS DE SOUZA; SOUZA, 2015, p.183). The interest for the territorial displacements of these subjects also became part of the biographical interest by the writers.

The twentieth century brought us another kind of journey to the center of travel narratives, to those forcibly made, by exile, by forced migration and that imposed on the subject, the contemplation of spaces that at the same time provoked hope and terror, security and instability. Unlike the Greek mythological traveler, the medieval adventurer, the sailor towards the unknown, this traveler knows that what awaits him will not be the same, the sameness of life left in a past, sometimes already destroyed before departure. Those are stories of survivors, who in the process of migration have produced another form of being-in-the-world, reconfiguring themselves. And it is this process of reconfiguration of the subject that self (de)form while accommodating itself in contexts of frequent expulsions that interests us in an author who experienced the convulsions of the first half of the twentieth century.

## **Elias Canetti**

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Elias Canetti was born in Ruschuk, Bulgaria, in 1905, into a family of Sephardic Jews, but formally citizens of Turkey. He was an immigrant in England, Switzerland, Austria and Germany before settling as an English citizen after his escape from Nazism. The Austrians take him as national author, so do the Bulgarians; he received the Nobel Prize as English writer, but chose Switzerland to live, one of the landscapes of his childhood, *a man without country*. And an author with no homeland finds, in the perspective of literary historiography, an initial and additional difficulty in the process of historical narratives production on national literary phenomena, of being located (MATOS DE SOUZA, 2014). The author himself defined himself as a Spanish writer of German expression (CANETTI, 2013), which does not facilitate his inclusion in any of the traditions pointed out and says something about his non-alignment as a national subject, as well as the effect that forced detachment may have on the conformation of identities.

The life of this subject who crossed the twentieth century preferring to share the sensitive through the grotesque that was approaching, which small extract of life traces what was to live in a society disintegrating itself through conflicts that occurred in a flow much

more intense than one a subject could bear and that it has led many to silence, tells us something about how to be a survivor in the strict sense.

If we can talk about a multiple faces Canetti now (DONAHUE; PREECE, 2007; SHASTINA, 2013; MATOS DE SOUZA, 2015), it has a lot to do with our inability to understand the existence of subjects like him, with a life carried intensely in the razor. It is fairer to say that he was a guardian of metamorphosis.

## The (de)formative journey

The texts of Elias Canetti are taken as a corpus to discuss the formative sense that the forced displacements produce on the subjects that are set in motion by the refuge, by the desperate flight of zones in conflict and by the abandonment of their deeper identity elements, such as family, language and territory.

Formation, in this study, was thought as *Bildung* and, in a double dimension, should be considered as an ethical and political problems. Ethical as far as it designates a temporal and historical process by which an individual, a people, a nation or a work of art takes form; And political, when he proposes to perfect the abstract subject of enlightenment by giving him harmony, wholeness and perfection, while liberating him from the state sphere, which places him in opposition to the hegemonic ideals of the Enlightenment at the time (FABRE, 2011a).

When we resume *Bildung* contemporarily, we do not do it as an exercise in affirming human cognitive abilities, but as an opening to the sensible, reestablishing a formation that seeks to respond to the gaps of modern rationality, articulating knowledge, ethics and aesthetics as intrinsic and interpenetrating dimensions of human, trying to understand how the being comes to be what it is. "In this case, formation should not only be understood as the process that carries out the historical elevation of the universal spirit, but is also the element where the one who formed has moved" (GADAMER, 2005, p.50). If in medieval mysticism the idea of a *Bildung* was to give a form similar to God's one to man, in our times "it's all about giving oneself its own form" (FABRE, 2011b, p. 348).

Starting from this point we join a tradition, which approaches Formation from the interlude of experience, taking it not as a possible object to be pedagogized, turned into methodology, program, indoctrination, but an experience of man aware of its end and about which has to bear witness, not to be an example, to be a text to read for the other.

Thus, thinking about the identity of the subject within a cyclical horizon, changing and constantly reopened by uncertainty, allows us to think about the idea of subject reinscribed in an immanent language, which sees in human becoming the closest expression of what we can call life. Or rather, life is what a subject does with what happens to him. The idea of giving to oneself its own form imposes the displacement of the question of Formation, in its relation to experience, which perceives the way in which this subject is formed, as far as it inherits a world marked by language, by a grammar. By inheriting this grammar we receive an identity, a past that comes together and that will configure our present, placing us in the position of interpreters of this world. "To interpret is to read the past from the present, to read the past in a present that anticipates a future – the possibility of being in another way, different, yet never totally different. To interpret is to keep open to a possibility always uncertain" (MÈLICH, 2012, 45), and by remaining open to novelty and creation, the subject reaffirms the need to invent, narrate and interpret. Not an absolute and definitive interpretation, but a revisable interpretation. Interpretations are infinite because each interpretation is finite.

Experience is a formative event, because it shows the subject its singular and undeniable finitude. In our lives, we suffer from our experiences, for they let us down and the subject of experience is that one who lets himself down, being affected as in a passing territory. "In suffering, one does not become active, but one is not simply passive. The passionate subject is not agent, but patient... Therefore, the passionate subject is not in himself, in his own possession, in self-control, but he is outside himself "(LARROSA, 2015, 29). And when we experience - an experience, not an experiment - we experience a shift toward the other, or ourselves as another. Experience does not leave you in the same place, it transforms you.

These processes promote a (de)formation of the subject, as far as they do not mark the return of the subject to an original cultural horizon and its search for an identity, such questions carry a tragic, disintegrating component; those are deformation journeys, in which there is no back home. The escape is not a fruition journey of tourism, but an uncertain journey, which destination is unpredictable and uncontrollable, not pedagogically formatted (MATOS DE SOUZA; SOUZA, 2016).

For the work with Canetti we try to understand how our author narrates his finitude from a contextual language, the grammar inherited from his time, perceiving the moments in which the formation emerges as representations that inform the context of his experiences as an immigrant.

## Seeing yourself as one else through displacement<sup>3</sup>

Before the maiden voyage, the very first one, the one that widens the horizons of our comprehension of the world and who we are, we live immersed in the local culture which, no matter how rich and diversified it may be, finds it difficult to present the difference to us, as far as we are individuals of a place and we understand our relationship with the world from this contextual horizon. Multicultural environments such as Ruschuk, the Bulgarian city where Elias Canetti was born, can give us a mistaken impression of a tolerant world in which each identity group lives in its own zone and the integration of these spaces produces a city that gives us an intercultural impression.

Canetti was born in a Jewish family of western roots, either by the Sephardic origin (Spanish Jews exiled in the East since the period of the Reconquest) or by the familiar economic condition, that allowed him to enjoy the consumption and the elements of the literate culture of the great European centers; and despite living on the edges of Eastern Europe, it cannot be said that he was an *ostjuden*<sup>4</sup>, since he shared all the tastes and references of a Western erudite. For this reason, his experience as a subject was closer to the Viennese and Parisian bourgeoisie than to the Eastern European cultural groups. Only in the displacement of his comfort he could experience the treatment intended for his people in that region of the world.

Canetti's experience with forced journey begins in early childhood, when, for financial reasons and to escape World War I, the Canetti family moves to England, a very different place from Bulgaria that is independent of the Ottoman Empire from which they were native, starting from the language requirement of speaking only one language, English, the first language he is forced to learn in order to survive. After his family moved to England, his linguistic experience changes drastically. From an environment where many languages sounded on the border of Europe and Asia, he finds himself in England, in an industrial city, Manchester, and in an environment in which the need to learn a new language was imposed, since there was no possible social coexistence through other languages, it was the English

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3 The (de)formative experience represented in the autobiographical and memorialistic texts of Elias Canetti are vast and resulted in a study of which this work is a small clipping, this discussion can be better perceived in Matos de Souza, R. (2013), Matos de Souza, R. (2014), Matos de Souza, R. (2015), Matos de Souza, R. (2016) and Matos de Souza, R. & Souza, E. C (2016).

4 Eastern Jew.

language that was imposed as the only linguistic outlet: "With us, the children. He [the father] now only speaks English; Ladin, until then had been my language, was relegated to the background and I only heard of other people, especially elder relatives. [...] "The comments on the books I used to read, he just wanted to hear them in English" (CANETTI, 2010, 53). But at the same time that he follows his father's orders, trying to master the language of his new country, he remains attentive to the language that causes him desire, German, especially in relation to music and learns the first words in Teutonic, while his mother requires him to learn one more language, French.

Canetti's self-formative interest in languages was, finally, the result of a condition always placed for him beyond the current language of expression, the demand for one more language. When he was a Ladin speaker, Bulgarian language was required to enter the life of his city; when English becomes the hegemonic language of his speech, the family opposes the learning of French; When he moves to Lausanne, a francophone city, where the learning of French could be deepened and consolidated, his mother requires him to learn German. His polyglottism was constituted by the constant displacement of his identity roles, and to be a naturalized Bulgarian Sephardic Englishman and resident of Vienna, it was necessary to learn to slide through the crystallizing processes of identifications, which reduction wants to associate hermetically a language with a nationality and a subject, the displacement causes strangeness. Canetti was able to deal with this displacement by becoming the figure of an identity that only in the present time was made possible, that of the non-national European citizen projected by the post-national enterprises of territorial unification, that put under a same flag a territory that goes from Portugal to Bulgaria.

It is precisely on a journey that he experiences seeing himself as unwelcome for the first time when returning from his first trip to Bulgaria in 1910 with his mother. She has her belongings inspected around the train station to the delight of Romanian customs officials, which allows the young Elias to have the first experience of xenophobia, the progressive and continuous spread of hatred among nations (CANETTI, 2010: 131). The mother leaves her belongings in the middle of the station to preserve the little dignity she has left. The jokes of the customs officials addressed to his mother record the multiple condition of his identity as a child: he was Bulgarian by birth, culturally Jewish, and administratively Turkish, because, out of loyalty - or security - the Canetti family remained with Turkish passports. His lack of identification provoked, throughout his life, a series of discomforts, because, except for

Ruschuk and, after naturalization, London, all addresses of our author did not correspond to his national identity.

As an adult and with the advance of the Nazi wave in Vienna, Canetti sees his life and his wife's in danger, especially after the *kristalnacht*, an event that served as a landmark for the exile of a series of Jewish-origin Viennese intellectuals for the violence. They fled initially to Paris, arriving in London in January, 1939. They are welcomed by Anna Mahler in her already exiled studio and editor Constant David Huntington. He begins the preparation of writing the *Crowds and Power* manuscript under the impact of his experience of escape from Nazism.

The following years, despite a little mentioned situation, will be of many needs, poverty, insecurity and usual humiliations to exiles, it is foolish who reads the silence about the misery from Canetti as the lack of memory on the suffering (ADLER, 2009). Between bitterness and tenderness, our author definitely opts for the second one, which may give the wrong impression, that he was writing, delighting intellectually under the bombs, as in one of his posthumous titles (CANETTI, 2009). There was, beyond the financial question, the insecurity of being an immigrant.

As you did not write you missed many events that have happened in recent times and were left to posterity. Suffice it to say that we had to sacrifice our vehicle, which is not a car obviously, because while your brother, the director, has two cars, and you have another giant in place of that small and nice, we only got a bike, a bike of twelve guineas, from the time of the war, which your brother lost a week ago. I mean, he left it anywhere, forgetting where, and because you are so afraid of reporting the loss at the police station, he did not give me any explanation on the subject for fear I would make him go to the police. (CANETTI; CANETTI; CANETTI, 2005, p. 151).

The cosmopolitanism and Western Europeanism experienced by Canetti in much of his life, as well as his knowledge of the language, mean little to his status as a migrant and an illegal migrant. To think about this condition of subject, which has been moving since childhood as an everlasting traveler, whose vision of territory is not limited to the frontier limits of the nation-state, shows a negative aspect of journeys, which is the lesser being, as far as when you move you lose your national, linguistic, professional and social identification references and, in order not to remain excluded, you need to reinvent yourself as a person in that other space.

Canetti tried to exist on a continent in a historical moment that negotiated his identity positioning from the economic migrations, the flight of the war and, finally, consolidated by the last forced trip caused by the contact with the pre-auschwitzian evil, when he needs again to escape to survive before the outbreak of World War II. His experience as a European immigrant and the reactions to his existence can help us to think of a world that apparently starts another cavalcade towards authoritarianism, whose initial mark seems to be resistance to the new Canettis, other forced travelers, who now migrate from Africa and Middle East.

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