Aspects of Confucianism in Elias Canetti's Notes and Essays

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Two central themes in Elias Canetti's work as a thinker and essayist are the problem of the crowd and the problem of death. In his analysis of power and especially in his phenomenological description of the ruler (*Machthaber*) both themes are fused into one. The way Canetti elaborates these problems is quite unique in style as well as in perspective. Drawing extensively on materials provided by the historical, psychological and above all anthropological research of his time, he is rather detached from intellectual or academic currents in his synthesis. Part of this synthesis is an interpretation of some elements of classical Confucianism as a model, unsurpassed in his eyes, to cope with still existing problems. This is what I want to focus on in this paper.

I. Life as Being-Against-Death

In one of the later paragraphs of *Die Provinz des Menschen*[1] Canetti writes: "It is the greatest effort in life not to get used to death."[2] This is only one among many passages that show how central the problem of death for Canetti really is. Talking about the "greatest effort in life," and that means, about what we by all means should try to achieve in order to be what we are, he is talking about the relationship of man towards death. And man seems to be inclined, as Canetti sees it, to get used to the fact of dying and death, to take it as a matter of course. Exactly this should not be.

The idea that the question of man's relationship towards death is essential for the proper understanding of what man really is can be considered at least since Kierkegaard as one of the topoi of modern literature and philosophy. A well known example from philosophy is Heidegger's analysis of Being-there (*Dasein*) in *Sein und Zeit* (*Being and Time*) and his description of its Being-a-whole (*Ganzsein*) as rooted in its Being-towards-death (*Sein zum Tode*).[3] As for literature the theme of death in Rilke's

Duineser Elegien (*Duino Elegies*) and in his novel *Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge* (*Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*) may be mentioned. The essential feature of that topos is the distinction between an adequate or – to use the language of Heidegger – authentic mode of man's relationship towards death and others which are inadequate or unauthentic.[4] The way, in other words, in which man relates himself towards death is subject to the question of right or wrong, adequate or inadequate. What can be considered as a topos however does not only include the awareness of that question, it includes as well a certain form of answer. Man's relationship towards death is usually understood to be unauthentic, if he tries to turn away from death and not to think of it, or if he thinks of it as something that will bother him only later. It is understood to be authentic, on the other hand, if he sees death as something that belongs to life or even is giving meaning to it, if in one way or other he is accepting death.

Canetti, as has been shown, is one of the writers who are asking the question. In his answer, however, he does not follow the topos:

> The most daring aspect of life is its hatred against death, and contemptible as well as desperate are those religions that try to blur that hatred.[5]
>
> ... to hate the death of all others in the same way as one's own, to make peace with everybody and everything, except death.[6]
>
> As soon as I accept death, so sometimes I think, the world will vaporize into nothingness.[7]

Not to get used to death is only a negative description of man's relationship towards death. The first two of these passages tell us what it means in positive terms: It means to hate death and to keep the flame of that hatred burning. In Canetti's view death is the thoroughly unfair, unjustifiable and meaningless interruption and destruction of life and just that. The only acceptable image to describe death is the image of the enemy. Death is the enemy of life and no reconciliation with that enemy is possible. All attempts to end the fighting and to accept death will not result in reconciliation but in surrender. Life is not Being-towards-death, it is Being-against-death, and it is missing its very essence as soon as it tries to give death any positive meaning whatsoever. Canetti knows that it is hardly possible to win the

war against death. As the wall is there, however, we have only one authentic option, and that is to run against it:

> The wall we are running against should not be speculated away. To take upon oneself the unbearable. Not to deny away anything. Not to dance away.[8]

II. The Confucian Paradigm I

According to Canetti one of the permanent threats a thinker has to cope with is the danger of self-deception:

> The whole art is to see just a few things without any delusion: small islands within the ocean of self-deception. To keep clinging to them and not to get drowned, that is the utmost man can achieve.[9]

In his view his own opinion of death is one of these islands within the ocean of self-deception. And it is a particularly isolated island. Not only the thoughts and opinions of his own time but also the traditions of nearly all cultures and civilizations of mankind are, as far as the question of death is concerned, victims of the everpresent waters of self-deception. Special attention is given to the various religions. Canetti analyses the different forms of religious belief as different perspectives on death, and all of them are missing the point.[10] Other forms of that failure belong to the history of philosophy.[11] The basic pattern is the same.

Looking back and around himself with disappointment, Canetti discovers but one exception. In his essay on the *Analects* he refers to the famous passage where Confucius, asked about death, gives the answer: "While you do not know life, how can you know about death?"[12] Canetti comments:

> A sentence more adequate than that has never been said on this subject.[13]

Confucius knows, as Canetti reads this passage, that questions about death usually are questions about what is coming after death. If "there is" something after death in the same way as "there was" something before, the fact of death is loosing all its weight, and that is the reason why we

persistently want to know. But it is impossible to know. If we nevertheless try to appease our horror by talking about death and beyond, we engage, as Canetti repeatedly calls it, in "degrading jugglery."[14] Exactly that is what religions are doing. Confucius however, as the passage quoted above shows, refuses to follow that practice. This is not only an academic question. It means to concentrate all the energy of life on life itself and not to waste part of it in the realm of lofty speculations:

> Thus all value is given to life itself. All that gravity and splendour that has been taken away from it by shifting a portion of its energies, and perhaps the best, behind death, is being returned.[15]

In this comparatively recent essay – it was first published in 1971 – we do not find any more the more aggressive tones of earlier texts, stressing man's duty to fight against death and to hate death. The central idea, however, is the same, and this more moderate mode of presentation may even help us to understand better the meaning of the earlier passages as well: in Canetti's view man's relationship towards death is authentic if and only if the radical difference between life and death is kept distinct and unblurred, if everything life has to give is concentrated on life itself. The aggressive imagery of earlier texts is saying the same thing by emphasizing the problem that it needs constant efforts to keep that difference unblurred. If it is that very difference and the command not to blur it which Confucius teaches, Canetti can well be seen as one of his disciples.

III. The Passion of Power

Canetti began to study the phenomenon of the crowd as early as 1925.[16] Six years later he realized that to understand this phenomenon a complementary study of the problem of power was necessary.[17] The axis of his analysis of power is the concept of survival. In *Masse und Macht* (*Crowd and Power*) we read: "The moment of survival is the moment of power."[18] What does that mean?

Canetti describes what goes on in human beings when confronted with the death of others, and again we see here his emphasis on absolute veracity. The first reaction may be what is generally considered as proper, a feeling of horror and, if the departed was close to us, of sadness, loss and mourning. After that, however, Canetti unveils something very

different:

> The horror in view of the dead, lying there in front of you, is being replaced by satisfaction: it is not you who is dead. It could have been you. But it is the other who is lying there.
> . . .
> Soon that feeling is beginning to dominate. What was horror once is then being saturated with satisfaction.[19]

He discovers a psychological mechanism that produces a feeling of triumph. Within the situation of survival we feel ourselves stronger or at least less fragile than in any other situation:

> The living never thinks himself bigger than in confrontation with the dead who has fallen forever. At that moment he feels himself grown.[20]

That mechanism is an anthropological fact. It is up to us how to cope with those feelings, but it is not within our control to have or not to have them:

> It is a fact so horrible and naked that people desperately try to veil it. To be or not to be ashamed of it is crucial as far as the moral evaluation of people is concerned. It does not affect the fact itself.[21]

Usually our feelings of triumph in the situation of survival are kept secret and sometimes we will not even admit them to ourselves. In nearly all cultures, however, there exists a phenomenon that shows how these feelings nevertheless have been allowed to cross the border of secrecy and become publicly accepted. It is the phenomenon of the hero.

The hero is the notorious survivor. He moves from one challenge to the next, leaving behind an ever growing number of fallen enemies, and with each victory, with each experience of survival, he becomes stronger and feels himself stronger.[22] As Canetti sees it, the feeling of happiness at the moment of survival is so intense that the longing for repetition can easily get out of hand and develop very fast into insatiable passion.[23] To satisfy this passion the path of the hero from challenge to challenge is not enough. The survival-addict will only get what his passion makes him

need, if he manages to manipulate whole societies as a means to his end:

> The obsessed will usurp the structures of society around himself and transform them into a means to indulge in his passion.[24]

His passion is the passion of power.[25] What drives the ruler to be one in the first place and what leads him in all his actions and decisions is his passion to be the exclusive survivor.

In *Masse und Macht* this analysis of power is unfolded in all its detail and based on abundant materials from history and anthropology. For the purpose of this paper it is enough just to understand the general idea of how the phenomenon of power is linked to the fact of death: the root of power is the psychological mechanism that makes us feel secretly enhanced when confronted with the death of others. Whenever these feelings spill over the limits of shame or of social conventions or both and become an object of passion the phenomenon of power develops.

IV. The Confucian Paradigm II

If my reading of the *Analects* is correct, the authentic relationship of man towards death according to Confucius includes two aspects. One of them is the already described concentration of all energies of life on itself. However, this cannot be sufficient. Concentrating on life we are confronted with the fact that others are dying and already have died. If we understand the question of our relationship towards death as part of the problem of how to live, it is transformed into the question of our relationship towards the dead. To say it in the language of Canetti: It is transformed into the question of how to master the situation of survival.

According to the *Analects* and the Confucian tradition as a whole, the answer to this question is to be found in the rules of mourning as part of the rules of propriety or *li* [禮]. These rules, as is well known, are quite extensive. They found their critics rather early in Chinese philosophy, above all in Motze.[26] Canetti understands this side of Confucianism within the horizon of his analysis of power. Talking about the *Book of Rites* [禮記] he says:

> The most credible thing I ever read on getting closer to the dead, on the feeling of their presence during days fixed for their

commemoration, I found it in that very *Book of Rites.*[27]

In the extended period of mourning as well as in the various rites the filial son has to observe after the death of his parents, Canetti discovers a meaning that seems to be worth thinking about:

> He who has to mourn three years for his father and to interrupt all his usual activities for such a long period of time will not feel any pleasure in being the survivor. And even if it was still possible, all satisfaction in surviving will certainly be eliminated by the ritual duties of mourning he has to observe.[28]

The rules of mourning are seen to be nothing less than a means to cope with the psychological mechanism described above. The filial son as the survivor has to observe a complicated and extended pattern of rites, because this will block, reduce or eliminate all feelings of triumph that naturally will start to emerge at the moment of survival. On this point too, Confucianism seems to be something unique. Talking again about the rules of mourning in the *Book of Rites* Canetti says:

> To my knowledge this is among all civilizations the only serious attempt to dissolve the lasciviousness of survival. As it is such an attempt we will have to consider Confucianism in its origin without any prejudices, in spite of all deformations that were to develop later.[29]

It would be interesting, taking this interpretation as a basis, to ponder the teachings of the ideal ruler and of the ideal government in Confucianism and within the framework of Chinese civilization in general. If we understand the genesis of the phenomenon of power in the way Canetti describes it, and if the Chinese civilization at a very early stage became aware that this very phenomenon has to do with the problem of the situation of survival, thus focusing on means to handle that situation along the lines of shame and not of passion, then we can expect an idea of government without "power" in the terminological sense of Canetti. Could it be that we have to understand the ideal of government by example, a crucial point for Confucianism, in view of this interpretation?

Notes

1. In preparing this paper the German original of Canetti's works has been used. As a matter of convenience all quotations are presented in an English paraphrase within the text while the German version is provided in the notes.
2. Elias Canetti, *Die Provinz des Menschen*, Aufzeichnungen 1942-1972, Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1976, (*PM*), 258. "Die größte Anstrengung des Lebens ist, sich nicht an den Tod zu gewöhnen."
3. See Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, §§46-53.
4. *Ibid.*
5. *PM*, 30: "Das Kühnste am Leben ist, daß es den Tod haßt, und verächtlich und verzweifelt sind die Religionen, die diesen Haß verwischen."
6. *PM*, 40: "... jedermanns Tod wie den eigenen hassen, mit allem einmal Frieden schließen, nie mit dem Tod."
7. *PM*, 49: "Manchmal glaube ich, sobald ich den Tod anerkenne, wird sich die Welt in Nichts auflösen."
8. *PM*, 303: "Es soll die Wand nicht weggedacht werden, gegen die wir anrennen. Das unerträglich Schwere auf sich nehmen. Nichts wegleugnen. Nicht davontänzeln."
9. *PM*, 233: "Die Kunst besteht darin, sich über einiges nicht zu täuschen: winzige Felsinseln im Meer der Selbsttäuschung. An diese sich zu klammern und nicht zu ertrinken, ist das Äußerste, was ein Mensch zustande bringt."
10. See *PM*, 92.
11. See *PM*, 294.
12. *Analects* XI/11, transl. Legge.
13. Elias Canetti, "Konfuzius in seinen Gesprächen," in *Das Gewissen der Worte*, Frankfurt a. M.: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1981, (*GW*), 209. "Ein Satz, der angemessener wäre, ist über diesen Gegenstand nie ausgesprochen worden."
14. *Ibid.*
15. *Ibid.*: "Aller Wert wird damit auf das Leben selbst verlegt, was man dem Leben an Ernst und Glanz genommen hat, indem man einen guten, vielleicht den besten Teil seiner Kraft hinter den Tod verlegte, wird ihm wieder zurückstattet."
16. Elias Canetti, *Masse und Macht*, vol. I, Munich: Reihe Hanser, 1976, (*MMI*), 1.
17. *Ibid.*
18. *Ibid.*, 249: "Der Augenblick des Überlebens ist der Augenblick der Macht." Cf. *GW*, 27.
19. *GW*, 26f.: "Der Schrecken über den Toten, wie er vor einem daliegt, wird abgelöst von Genugtuung: man ist nicht selbst der Tote. Man hätte es sein können. Aber es ist der andere, der liegt... / Es ist dieses Gefühl, das sehr rasch die Oberhand gewinnt; was erst Schrecken war, durchdringt sich nun mit Befriedigung."
20. *Ibid.*, 27: "Der Lebende dünkt sich nie größer, als wenn er mit dem Toten confrontiert ist, der für immer gefällt ist: in diesem Augenblick ist ihm, als wäre er gewachsen."
21. *Ibid.*: "Dieser Sachverhalt ist so furchtbar und so nackt, daß er auf jede Weise verschleiert wird. Ob man sich seiner schämt oder nicht, ist für die Bewertung des Menschen entscheidend. Aber am Sachverhalt selbst ändert es nichts."
22. See *ibid.* 28f. and *MMI* 251f.
23. See *GW*, 31.
24. *Ibid.*: "Wer von ihr besessen ist, wird sich die Formen gesellschaftlichen Lebens

um ihn in der Weise zu eigen machen, daß sie der Frönung dieser Passion dienen."

25. *Ibid.*, 32.
26. See Motze VI/3.
27. *GW*, 209: "Das Glaubwürdigste, was ich über die Annäherung an die Toten je gelesen habe, über das Gefühl ihrer Gegenwart an den Tagen, die zu ihrem Gedächtnis bestimmt sind, findet sich in diesem Buch der Riten."
28. *Ibid.*, 210: "Wer drei Jahre für seinen Vater trauert, den Lauf seiner gewohnten Tätigkeit so vollkommen und so lang unterbricht, kann keine Freude am Überleben fühlen, jede Genugtuung am Überleben, selbst wenn sie noch möglich wäre, wird durch den Gang der Verpflichtungen zur Trauer von Grund auf ausgemerzt."
29. *Ibid.*: "Es ist, von allen Zivilisationen, der einzige ernsthafte Versuch, der mir bekannt ist, die Lüsternheit des Überlebens aufzulösen. Als solchen wird man den Konfuzianismus in seinem Ursprung, all seinen späteren Entartungen zum Trotz, wenigstens in diesem Aspekt, sehr vorurteilslos bedenken müssen."