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El misterio de la muerte en los apuntes y aforismos de Elias Canetti

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The Mystery of Death in Elias Canetti's Notes and Aphorisms

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Resumen: En este artículo proponemos una revisión exhaustiva y sistemática de los apuntes y aforismos de Elias Canetti, basada en la hipótesis de que la muerte aparece en ellos como lo que denominamos un “misterio” o “dato radical”. Esta lectura se distancia deliberadamente de las interpretaciones hegemónicas que han prevalecido en las últimas décadas, que tienden a tratar la muerte como un instrumento de la política o como un elemento que opera dentro de su propio campo, en lugar de como el misterio irreducible e irresoluble que necesariamente la rodea. En contra de estos enfoques, argumentamos que la naturaleza radical de la muerte en los Apuntes de Canetti —que se resiste explícitamente a las interpretaciones biológicas, sociológicas, psicoanalíticas e incluso filosóficas— obliga a la política a confrontar una serie de cuestiones éticas. Estas se refieren a la pérdida absoluta que implica la muerte, la exigencia de la salvación del otro y la primacía ética de la muerte del otro.

Palabras clave: Canetti, muerte, ética, apuntes, política.

Abstract: In this article, we propose a thorough and systematic revision of Elias Canetti's Notes grounded in the hypothesis that death appears there

as what we call a “mystery” or “radical fact”. This reading deliberately distances itself from the hegemonic interpretations that have prevailed over recent decades, which tend to treat death as an instrument of politics or as one element operating within its own field, rather than as the irreducible and unsolvable mystery that necessarily surrounds it. Against these approaches, we argue that the radical nature of death in Canetti’s *Notes*—which explicitly resists biological, sociological, psychoanalytical, and even philosophical interpretations—forces politics to confront a series of ethical questions. These concern the absolute loss implied by death, the demand for the salvation of the other, and the ethical primacy of the other’s death.

Keywords: Canetti, Death, Ethics, Notes, Politics.

Introduction

Death is one of the major themes of Canetti's work, a concern that runs through almost all of his texts. Indeed, from his three plays (1982), each of which placed death at the center of the stage, through the centrality of survival and the question of the invisible masses of the dead and the unborn in *Crowds and Power* (1987), to the frequent mentions of his relationship with death in his autobiography (2006, 2011) and his reflections in his *Notes* (2008), the grim reaper never ceases to haunt Canetti's writing. How can we understand the heterogeneity of meanings in which it emerges, where it is linked, in an apparently dispersed series of writing genres, to diverse anthropological, historical, philosophical, and psychoanalytical realities and concepts? What can we say about Canetti's general conception of death? In this article, we would like to outline a possible answer to these last questions: in Canetti's *Notes*, death appears as mystery, a radical fact.¹

The radical fact of death, associated with the "mystery" and opposed to the "problem", will allow us to separate our interpretation from the hegemonic reading of his texts, which, as we shall see, has governed the state of the art since the last decades of the twentieth century. For a number of commentators have, in fact, seen in death a mere instrument of politics—or of power, which is, for these works, a synonym of politics. Thus, death appears in them as one more element of political life, as one more problem

¹ We will analyze here only the notes, since we have taken care to dwell on his fictional work (the novel, *Auto de fe*, and the aforementioned plays), essayistic (*The Consciousness of Words*), autobiographical, and theoretical (*Crowds and Power*) elsewhere ("Anonymising Identifying Information").

with which politics has to deal, or which it has to channel as one of its tools. In contrast, our recovery of death as a radical fact, and not as a problem or an instrument, allows us to think of it as something that politics is always facing, not as an obstacle that stands before it, but as the mystery that necessarily envelops it, and which throws it into a set of ethical questions with which it has to coexist, without a definitive answer. A series of perennial interrogations linked, as we shall see, to the mystery of death, to the absolute loss of the other, and to the ethical demand for his salvation.

To achieve our objective, we will begin by reviewing various interpretations that see in Canetti a thinker critical of power, who opposes death by denouncing it as the fundamental instrument by which politics undermines the metamorphic capacity of subjects. Secondly, we will argue from our reading of Canetti the specificity of the idea of death as a radical fact, to then find it, finally, from three questions that make it manifest: one regarding its mysterious dimension, another pointing to the absolute of loss—to the terrible dead's waste without return—and, with it, to the question for the ethical primacy of the death of the other.

The State of the Art. Death as an Instrument of Power

It could be said that the field of readings on Canetti's work is mainly governed by the interpretations that have been labelled ("Anonymising Identifying Information") "Deleuzian-vitalist". This body of work emphasizes the idea of metamorphosis as an expansion of the possibilities of the human being (Brighenti 2010, 2023; Campillo 2006; Cerruti 2024; Marramao 2008; Martínez 2006; Vázquez Tamayo 2020; Ishaghpour 1990). If power for Canetti is constituted, in large part, by the triumph over the death of the other,

by the possibility that the other dies in my place or, in any case, that he accepts the order I give him—an order that always in the last instance is a threat of death (*Masa y poder*)— then metamorphosis would reside unequivocally on the side of life. If power, we say, is thus linked to a certain giving-death, or to a power-giving-death surviving the other, then metamorphosis would be the capacity by which, transforming himself into others and remembering the deceased, man welcomes otherness within himself, becoming something other than himself by rejecting death. The disadvantage of these views is not only that by homologizing power and politics they renounce the latter, but also that they tend to reposition the quest for the universal for which Canetti advocates solely on the level of an individual literary wager in opposition to death and, with it, in opposition to a series of ethical-political problems linked to death, to which we shall return.

Another type of approach, which could be called “eschatological”, is found in the work of Figuiet (2006), who, while also underlining a certain continuity between survival, death of the other, and power—“The moment of survival is the moment of power” (Canetti, *Masa y poder* 223)²—also says that there are two forms of innocent survival. The first is linked with the “surviving at a temporal distance” (245), a Canettian notion present in the section “The Forms of Survival” of *Crowds and Power*, of which we will speak in detail, since it is central to our own argument. This is, according to Figuiet, an innocent modality of survival insofar as one cannot have put to death those who lived long before oneself. And

² From here, all translations of texts from Spanish into English will be our authorship.

it would be innocent even though Canetti does admit that there is, with respect to it, a power relation between the living and the dead. The second form of innocent survival would be one that brings his reading closer to the Deleuzian-vitalist interpretation: immortality through the work of art, since, in writing, the writer's will is not to kill, but, on the contrary, to expand life. However, we call this interpretation "eschatological" since its specific emphasis lies neither in surviving at a temporal distance nor in that metamorphosis and "life in expansion", but almost on the opposite, in a third way of trying to escape power. In a dying with the dead: Figuiet interprets the funeral or lamentation packs analyzed by Canetti (1987) by highlighting the idea that, before the deceased flees to the world of the dead, the living seek to retain him. "And they would like", says Figuiet, "animated by guilt, to die with him" (6). This reading cancels the radicality of Canetti's position, whose own mark, as we will see, is the tearing in the face of death understood as an absolute loss of the other and of the self and, therefore, as a datum whose radicality is unacceptable and unbearable.

Another type of interpretation of the place of death in Canetti's political analyses is the one that could be called "post-foundationalist" (Mouffe, 1999; Agard, 2017), as it tends to emphasize the process by which Canetti shows in *Crowds and Power* that, although no political regime can finally expel all possibility of the appearance of death within it, some nevertheless manage to conjure it, by transforming, as Chantal Mouffe (1999) says, antagonistic relations into agonistic relations. According to the latter, Canetti would have shown, in the section "The essence of the parliamentary system" of the chapter *Crowd and History*, that English parliamentary democracy succeeds in reducing to a minimum the presence of death in human relations,

insofar as parliament would stage for him a combat in which one renounces killing in order to adopt the opinion of the majority. And then, from this point of view, the “elimination of death from the political scene is for Canetti an achievement, even if it is precarious” (Agard 283). Therefore, around 1960, England would have been the country that contributed most to the political codification of violence.

This analysis tends to see in the political world, as described in *Crowds and Power*, two heterogeneous levels, the instituting and the instituted, the political and politics. Politics would thus appear, Agard tells us, as a channeling of the infinite power of human metamorphosis, a power that singles us out from other species—since humanity, although it is part of the vital flow of the world, of the continuum of the natural world, at the same time necessarily breaks with it, always introduces a break with respect to that continuity because it does not have a finished essence, an identity with itself. The power of metamorphosis is ambivalent for him, since it can both help men to escape death and to kill others. Metamorphic politics would thus consist in channeling death as a negativity that lies outside of it, that is, as an exteriority from which we should remain distant. As we will argue in detail, this position that sees death as a “problem” ignores its mysterious character, whereby politics can never abandon the tragedy of the unsolvable questions it must face, beyond any appeal to the given forms of death—as murder, extermination, war, threat, and so on.

Thus, unlike the three positions we have just reviewed, we are about to postulate that for Canetti, death is a radical fact, irreducible to the evasive adventure of metamorphosis, to the eschatological celebration of its unacceptable absolute negativity, and to the institutional channeling of its instituting power.

The Mystery of Death

It is undeniable that Canetti *problematizes* death. In his reflections on the link between power and survival, in his alarming diagnosis of the nuclear scenario as a universal extension of the imminent possibility of death, in his analysis of the paranoia of various characters such as Schreber and Hitler, in his dense descriptions of the cultural modalities of lamentation or mourning, in his profound attention to the question of war;³ we could almost say, at all times, there is in his texts a concern for thinking about death as a problem, for thinking about the concrete ways in which, in our societies, death is experienced and death is given. Notwithstanding this, in Canetti's texts, death is first and foremost a mystery. Death is not only that question before which we stand, that object that is constantly in front of us, susceptible to our historical, cultural, ethnological, linguistic, sociological, or political analysis. It is, rather, a mystery in which political communities and the subjects that live in them are already always immersed, an envelope of absolute darkness within which we exist. All knowledge about ourselves and about the world contains within it this inextinguishable mystery⁴.

³ All these are main themes that Canetti works on throughout *Crowds and Power*.

⁴ “No matter how clear and thorough the rest of our self-understanding is, the incomprehensibility of death will remain folded within itself, silently gnawing at each of our certainties. All knowledge, whether about the world or about ourselves, contains within it an inextinguishable mystery. No matter how wonderfully we may have constructed our schemes of thought, it is a fact that each of us will fade into final obscurity along with our own thinking” (Carse 11-12).

If the problem by definition is illuminated, approached from the outside, the mystery, on the contrary, blurs the distinction between the outside and the inside, between what is before me and what is in me, and that is why with it I am immersed, submerged in an infinite opacity (Marcel, 1969; Jankélévitch, 2002; 2017)⁵. For the demographer, the biologist, the anthropologist, the sociologist, or the political scientist, death is often a problem. For Canetti, it is both a problem and a mystery:

I want death to be grave and serious, I want death to be terrible, and even more terrible where there is nothing to fear but nothingness. [Death] still seems to me as useless and perverse as ever, the fundamental evil of all that exists, the unresolved and incomprehensible. (*El libro contra la muerte* 39, 70).

The seriousness of death is in Canetti absolute, unresolvable, radically incomprehensible, and unacceptable. It is commonplace to situate his various texts on the horizon of a certain culturology of death: the Canetti whether sociologist, anthropologist or historian of death, would be the one who studies the cultural manifestations of death and dying, who embarks on long studies of ancient peoples to review in detail the different responses of humanity to the grim reaper, who critically denounces the social and technical modalities of murder. If the reading of his work is reduced to this gesture, the degradation of death from mystery to problem is fatal, for it greatly

⁵ Canetti quotes in a note, by the way, Gabriel Marcel, a French philosopher who elaborated in his *Metaphysical Diaries* (1969) this distinction between problem and mystery. “To love a person means to say: you will not die... Since I cannot love without desiring the immortality of the one I love... I cannot accept death” (*El libro contra la muerte* 220).

impoverishes one of the most singular features of his reflection. We believe, on the contrary, that culture certainly appears in his texts as a response to death—not only in the sense of specific “cultures of death”, but, as Jacques Derrida says in *Aporias* (1993), as Ernest Becker claims in *The Denial of Death* (1973), and also at a certain point as Sigmund Freud states in *Civilization and its Discontents* (1992), in the general sense that every culture is a way of responding to death (and this is but another way of speaking of mystery)—, but his reflection can never be reduced to a “cultural study”. Canetti, during the Second World War, points out:

Culture is manufactured by the vanities of all its promoters. It is a dangerous filter that distracts us from death. The most genuine manifestation of culture is an Egyptian tomb, where everything there is futile: utensils, ornaments, food, paintings, sculptures, prayers, and yet the dead man is not alive. (*El libro contra la muerte* 33)

The various “cultures”, those that certainly demarcate the borders between the different ways of facing death, are grouped and exceeded by this radical datum: the tremendous fact that the dead is dead anyway, whatever the utensil, the sculpture, the painting, the prayer, the biographical or collective history. All the dead are dead, we could say, radically dead. And on this point, death knows no borders. Death, which is the impassable edge of all life, death, which is that phenomenon whose forms change as it moves from culture to culture, is at the same time, and would be for Canetti if we are right, that which by definition has no frontier, that whose radical negation threatens the human throughout the earth and at every historical moment, in any culture and beyond any symbolic mediation: “all

death breaks the cohesion of the intricate network that is the world” (*El libro contra la muerte* 177). Indeed, if the anthropological incursions of *Crowds and Power* seem to contradict us—for reasons of length, we cannot dwell on them here—the notes and interviews do not fail to mark rather a disciplinary counterpoint with those perspectives that annul the mystery of *death as such*: “It is almost inconceivable to me [Canetti says in a 1983 interview on which we will insist later] that people who experience the death of their closest relatives are reluctant to see death as such” (*Arrebatos verbales* 850).

It is an expression, we will be told. But there are many times he speaks of “death as such” or of “death in general”. To show that this is not a mere idiom, let us dwell on his explicit contrast with the different disciplinary ways of facing death. Canetti repeatedly questions the idea of natural death: for no death is natural (*El libro contra la muerte* 105). Nor is the belief in the naturalness of death eternal: for some ancient peoples, every death was a crime (*Arrebatos verbales* 793). That is why, in his notes, he goes, again and again, against the various cancellations of his radicality:

First, against medicine, which claims to explain and justify the naturalness and inevitability of death (*El libro contra la muerte* 131). For Canetti, biology can in no way define the boundary between life and death, nor what it means to be human. As Jankélévitch (2017) says, death is simultaneously an empirical phenomenon, which we experience on a daily basis, and at the same time the meta-empirical par excellence, since a clot in a vein—which is not death—is enough for the transit between the here and the hereafter to be realized in an instant. Death, in Canetti, always exceeds the physical.

With this and, secondly, he points against psychoanalysis and the notion of death drive, which “is a descendant of ancient

and obscure philosophical doctrines, but is more dangerous than these because it is clothed with biological terms, which have the prestige of modernity” (155)⁶.

Third, against the idea of justice associated with the punishment or punishment of murderers, which would distance him, as he tells us, from men like Simon Wiesenthal, and also from historiography and the search for reparation by way of memory, because for Canetti it is not enough “to lead one of those butchers, the most terrible of the most terrible, to his punishment” but, ultimately, what human beings need is “to understand what death has done to them and [must] put an end once and for all to this ‘fact of nature’” (*El libro contra la muerte* 138).

Nor, fourthly, is Canetti convinced by the “sociological jargon” that dumbs down death, determining it historically, by redirecting it to its supposed social causality: “Since I have experienced how death is conceived in sociological jargon, I no longer likes to think about it. It is not the same since then. Death has become dumbed down” (145).

Fifth, the critique of medicine, psychoanalysis, and sociology does not lead him to identify himself as a philosopher, much less as a dialectical philosopher—we will insist on this later. The Hegelian dialectic cannot, according to him, come up in any real way against the fundamental and irreversible fact which is the basis of everything: “There is nothing to be done, nothing at all,

⁶ On his rejection of the death drive, which he considered his fundamental theoretical difference with Freudian psychoanalysis, interviews with Joachim Schickel and Rupprecht Slavko Baur can also be consulted (*Arrebatos verbales* 791, 806), as well as some passages from his autobiography (*La antorcha* 148; *El juego de ojos* 303).

with dialectics as Hegel understands it. After all, this has to do with a fundamental and irreversible fact that is the basis of everything: death” (147).

Sixth, with the philosophies of language, “which leave death aside as if it were something ‘metaphysical’, [which] does not alter in any way the fact that it is the oldest factum, older and more decisive than any language” (155). This relationship between death and language points, once again, to the radicality of that which “cannot be narrated” (150). There is something ambivalent in this last idea: on the one hand it is the end of narration, death as the most ancient, an anteriority to language that cannot be told, narrated; but, at the same time, to narrate death is always to narrate its social forms, its political modalities, its biographical figurations, and at this point the unacceptability of death as an experience of the irruption of nonmeaning reappears. In Canetti, every significant narrative seems like a house of cards that this final fact demolishes.

Seventh, and finally, if the idea of a factum more ancient and decisive than any language led him to discard the “analytical” approach of the philosophy of language, this does not mean that Canetti takes sides with the “continental” side of philosophy:

I read what the various philosophers have written about death and I am ashamed [...] The philosophers who would like to give us death as something we must bear, as if from the beginning it had been in us [...] They cannot bear to see it only at the end, they prefer to prolong it backwards, to the beginning, making it the most intimate companion of all life, and thus, under this attenuated and familiar form, it is tolerable for them [...] They prevent the only combat for which it would be worth fighting. (154)

Inadmissible, in fact, and at the limits of meaning, death is for Canetti what breaks the cohesion of the world; it is the incomprehensible fact that humans have always faced and to which no valid solution has yet been found. Neither biological, nor cultural, nor political, nor social. Death is often characterized in his notes as that which, being unreal, is the most specific or the most concrete, as the false and the always unworthy, as the most ancient and timeless fact, as the arcane that his contemporaneity does not understand at all. And its abyssal dimension, the idea of an uncrossable frontier between life and death, leads Canetti to seek to separate himself, as we have just seen, from the Hegelian dialectic. In the 1983 interview with Uwe Schweikert, the latter questions him on whether his mortuary inquiries were aimed at denouncing the epochal negation of death, that is, the absolute separation of death and life by those who simply deny or omit it, the “eclipse of death” in the culture of a contemporary world that indefinitely lengthens life by obliterating death (Ariès, 1975; Becker, 1973; Redeker, 2018). Canetti answers with a categorical “no”; he claims, in fact, his “struggle against death” is sustained in postulating the radical nature of that frontier, in pointing out death as an injustice that has nothing to do with life and that can teach us nothing about it, in rejecting the idea of natural death. Something similar to the conversation with Joachim Schickel in 1972, where, when asked about the possibility of a dialectical reading of his work, Canetti answers:

-[Canetti]: I have a particular reason that explains my distrust of dialectical language [...] I distrust pairs of oppositions [...] In many dialectical writings they become something very simple and accepted in the most incredible way, without a previous analysis: day and night, good and evil, life and death.

-[Schickel]: But this is a vulgar dialectic.

-[Canetti]: Undoubtedly. But the separation between life and death is decisive for me. And it seems to me extremely important that no one should be able to see life as death or to suppose that there is a superior synthesis between the two. (*Arrebatos verbales* 793)

Life and death are not susceptible to dialectics. The second is in Canetti, the absolute negation of life. His intransigence knows no synthesis because it tears the human being out of existence and takes him nowhere, destroying an existence that is lost forever, that can never ever return. Canetti's torn consciousness of death is therefore the result of the rejection of a dialectic that, in his opinion, hides the very serious component that lies in every mourning, in every visit to the cemetery, in every war, or simply in every apparently "natural" cardiac arrest: life, every life, is lost forever. The disciplinary questions just reviewed were, from this last point of view, a critique of the problematic blindness—in the double sense, because blindness is problematic, but also because it reduces the mystery to a problem—that sociology, biology, psychoanalysis, anthropology, historiography or philosophy have regarding the scandal, the unacceptability of the loss that shatters, tears apart, annihilates or makes our loved ones disappear forever. Canetti will say: everyone, all humanity, even our enemies, for death is always unworthy. The mystery of death thus leads us, then, to the dark depths of the eternally lost.

Absolute Loss

In the epilogue of the book *Política y Tragedia*, Eduardo Rinesi contrasts dialectics with tragedy, adding that each contains the other, though in different ways. Far from what might be believed, dialectics implies tragedy; it is tragedy plus a "but": at the end of

tragedies, several lives are lost or ruined, “But humanity has learned a lesson. For dialectics, the tragedies of history leave a lesson to men, and therein lies its transcendent meaning” (255). Rinesi thus shows us that tragedy is a moment of dialectics, but only a moment, since the negative is assimilated in the dialectical movement that synthesizes it into a new and surpassing positivity. Conversely, for tragic thought dialectics is a part of history, but only a part, because tragedy illuminates that which “remains unrecoverable, non-integrable” (255). Thus, the tragic experience leaves nothing in its wake: no synthesis, no lesson, no progress will give life back to those who have gone.

Following this way of understanding tragedy, we could call “tragic humanism” to Canetti’s bet, where “humanism” would be on account of a universalism on which previous works have already stopped (“Anonymising Identifying Information”), while “tragic” would point to the remarkable sensitivity for what leaves to never return. A sensibility that appears repeatedly in the notes, not only in the form of mourning, guilt, and responsibility for the death of the other.

First of all, it appears as an absence of meaning, because for those who leave, there is no real return or symbolic compensation possible: the expense of dying is total and without counterpart: “I still await the meaning-filled death of a person I know, and I know that this death does not exist, that it is always meaningless” (*El libro contra la muerte* 80). If we said above that language fails to name and bring back the dead, now it is the field of meaning in general that has no solution in the face of the mystery of death. Inexpressible and unexpressed in language, the death of the other and, with it, death as such, defy all meaning: neither rituals, nor beliefs, nor the evolution

of history, nor future generations, nor any revolution will be able to redeem this disappearance that awaits us all, this unconditional and non-stop erasure of our presence on the map. If anything remains or will remain of us, it will always be, for Canetti, too little:

We will never know if there is an intention behind that which we call death; but, if there is, it can only be the following: to lower and degrade the living to a mere futile object, to a trace that is not even a millionth part of what the living could have been (*El libro contra la muerte* 86-87).

Absolute negativity: this is what death seems to be for Canetti. Nothing will remain, since there is no real compensation possible. “You never know what will be the most valuable of what is left of you; perhaps someone will take to his lips a pair of your old shoes, old and worn out, when all your papers have long since burned” (88). The paper, this reiterated Canettian metaphor of the human being, at least a metaphor of what is left of each one after the final departure, is now shown, in these coordinates, as too little, too burnable, as a sort of bottle thrown into a sea without destination, with the frequent suspicion that it will be of no use:

What will become of everything accumulated in you, so much, so much, an intense store of memories and habits, of postponed questions, of shivering answers, of doubts, emotions, tenderness, hardness, all there, all there, what will become of it all when life is extinguished in you?

The disproportion of this accumulation, and all for nothing? (191)

All for nothing: taking these notes very seriously, those who read Canetti might suspect that there is something of the

“forms of survival” that are crucial to the argument of *Crowds and Power*, that there is something of his permanent questioning about survival, we say, that is central, but central not because the dead returns, but precisely because he knows that it is not possible to survive. In other words, it is exactly because he is tormented by the disproportionate nature of life in relation to death, which in a single instant takes away everything and forever, forever and for nothing, that Canetti devotes several decades to studying the cultural, social, anthropological, and political ways of confronting this departure. Indeed, those configurations of survival are imaginary modalities of living men and women, and by no means effective returns from beyond the grave, resurrections from the cemeteries, or rebirths from the tombs. As James Carse says in *Death and Existence*, “if one survives, one does not die [...] anything that dies is completely extinguished and does not continue in any form” (18).

For this impossibility of the return of those who have gone forever, which is also and above all the impossibility —social and political— of restoring the meaning of their existence, also displaces any reduction of the question of the *mysterium tremendum* of death to the search for the restitution of the past. Frequently, when an attempt is made to develop a political reading of a given author, the following applies to Canetti, but not only —it is about asking for his philosophy of history or his position in the face of history. Very well: with Canetti, the terrible factum of death is not immediately directed to the historical reparation for those who have gone, nor to the constitution of a future sense that can counterbalance what has happened. Because its size is such that it is a “combat lost beforehand” (*Masa y poder* 62).

In his beautiful essay entitled *Mientras no cambien los dioses, nada ha cambiado*, Sánchez Ferlosio critically exposes the discursive and political effects of the *Challenger* tragedy, when on Tuesday, January 28, 1986, its seven crew members died suddenly after the disintegration of the famous American shuttle. An ABC correspondent in New York—Sánchez Ferlosio tells us—called for the continuation of space progress after the accident: “Underneath the tears is the American determination to continue the space program [...] because [space] is also the future, and to leave it now would be a betrayal of those who have died to conquer it” (21). Sánchez Ferlosio, suggesting that, strictly speaking, one never really dies “for something”; suggesting, let us say, that all death is a kind of absolute waste, that no Cause nor any future will be able to compensate for the life of one who departed for all eternity, replies:

respect for the dead is not respect for their deaths and their causes, but respect for the lives they lost; to make their deaths serve for something is to deny the lives they have lost the right to have served for nothing, the privilege of being an end in themselves. (21)

As if what had to be safeguarded when seeking to do justice to a dead person was the uselessness of his life, the very meaninglessness of his existence that vanished without a trace, or leaving it, but perhaps every trace is a temptation, precisely to reestablish the concatenation of a meaning that erases the singularity of that nihilation. Sánchez Ferlosio thus questions the sacralization of death as a form of capitalization, pointing to the paradox that it is not the Cause that drove the sacrifice of our dead, but rather, conversely, it is the deceased who retroactively legitimize, for the

living, the Causes for which they supposedly died. This inversion is tricky, above all, because the accident in its gratuitousness is always subtracted, like life itself, from that cause-effect relationship that one tries to establish with the Cause, with History, with Progress or with the Future. And in this line, Ferlosio dwells on nothing less than the *Falkland Islands War*, a deadly war about which Canetti also had something to say. That mythical investment was deployed —the Spanish essayist comments again— by Jeremy Moore, one of the victorious British generals in the war, in replying to an argument typical of the logic by which blood creates law, and not only law creates blood: “Now the Falklands [Moore sentenced] are ours because we have paid for them with the lives of young British men, and any attempt to question this right is, without more, an offense to the dead” (*Mientras no cambien* 21).

On the contrary, the true opprobrium of the dead is, for Ferlosio and for Canetti, the mere fact of having died, of never being able to return, and thus not having the possibility of refuting the discursive operation that takes away from the end of his life the status of having been an unreserved expense. From this point of view, the Malvinas was an atrocious war, first of all, because innocent people died, because they died for nothing, and because they died forever. In his posthumous autobiography about the English years, an irate Canetti exclaims with Margaret Thatcher:

The “small” Malvinas war, which was accepted by the majority, is like a last memory of power, it costs lives, even if they are counted [...] It is difficult to calculate how many memories about this mini-war have proliferated along the ocean. Automatic dreams of the past in people who have never fought: useless for military service, women, peaceful men, everyone, people of all kinds, not only

those who had combat experience [...] I could never get over the shame of this mini-war: the coliseum in England, the oceanic naval games. (*Fiesta bajo las bombas* 42-43)

Death, Evil, and Ethics

Canetti's general anti-war sentiment is based, in effect, on the costliness of the loss that he judges, universally and by definition, inadmissible. Including, as we shall see again, that of the enemy. Even with the suspicion of the impolitic detour in which our author may at times incur with the denial of all war ("Anonymising Identifying Information"), our reading should also perceive that the undergrowth of war derives from an ontology of evil, the source of which is death. And so, all "negative anthropology", indeed, all "negative political anthropology", where in fact the morality of men and women is frighteningly led—for Canetti and almost always—to the darkness of reciprocal murder, internal to the human race and not strictly derivable from nature, all this negative anthropology, we were saying, is not self-contained. It depends, rather, on the very existence of death, the source of all evil: "Death and evil are for me the same thing" (*Arrebatos verbales* 808). In other words, man is evil because he dies, or more precisely, because death is evil and inescapable, and not the other way around: it is not that he dies because he is evil. The great question of his time, a social and political question—that which never ceases to be contained in every analysis of the phenomena that were contemporary to Canetti: world wars, genocides, nuclear threat, and so on—is that men kill each other, fight, wage war, and exterminate each other. And fascism was for him the ultimate and paranoid consummation of that logic of power. But this immense political problematic ultimately derives

from a general acceptance of the “original situation” (829) that confronts us with our impotence in the face of death as such.

Thus, death, which is “the most concrete” (851), constitutes the source of evil, and as long as men die, they will never be good. Subjective evil falls within an ontology of evil that, as we have seen, does not allow “dialectization” between good and evil or between life and death. So that at times it would seem that even Canetti’s gloomy diagnoses of twentieth-century societies do not even depend on the act of killing, but that murder is rather the result of the ontological status of this terrible fact: “The effect of death is the most terrible, the one that has done the most harm to men” (860). The negativity that one might constantly trace in the social and political analyses of *Crowds and Power*, according to this logic, leads back to the ultimate problem: the terrible dagger of death in human existence in general. For example, “Someday it will become evident that with all death, men become worse” (*El libro contra la muerte* 37).. Or: “How could there be no murderers as long as man agrees to die, as long as he is not ashamed to do so, as long as he incorporates death into his institutions as his surest, best, and most significant foundation?” (66). Or, finally:

It is nothing shameful or egocentric, it is something just, good and well-founded that, just now, nothing fills one more than the idea of immortality. Do we not see how there are people who are sent in wagons to death? Do they not laugh, joke and boast to falsely give value to each other? And then there are those who fly overhead in flocks of twenty, thirty, a hundred planes loaded with bombs [...] We can no longer say “God”; he is marked forever, he has on his forehead the Cainite stigma of wars, we can only think of one thing, the only savior: immortality! If it were ours,

if it were already in force, how different everything would be! Immortality! Who would want to go on killing? Who could think of killing if there was nothing left to kill? (45)

That is why the Canettian syntagm to name something like an ethic would be “Thou shalt not die (the first commandment)” (*El libro contra la muerte* 28), an impossible dream of immortality that, formulated as a commandment, would be incumbent upon everyone. For the torn conscience —once the death that condemns the departed, as we have seen, to inconsequence has taken place— is that of the living, who thus faces —we were about to say “without mediations”, but the truth is that war, technology, fascism, murder, and even the most “natural” death are all mediations between the subject and this original situation— guilt and responsibility for the one who has been lost forever. And for whose rescue the surviving individual could do nothing. This is the fundamental core of the ethics deployed in Canetti’s texts, and also of his own life trajectory, from the death of his father in 1912 to his last days and notes of 1994. The guilt is total, because we will never be able to revive those who have departed: “Since we no longer have them, we feel a unique and immeasurable guilt towards the dead: the guilt of not being able to bring them back. This guilt reaches its maximum intensity on the days when we feel most alive and happy” (*El libro contra la muerte* 93).

For not having been able to prevent his death, we are guilty. All of us. All of us, and for all of us. In each particular death, for Canetti, a universal component of responsibility for those who leave. For the human race in general. It is a combat lost beforehand: as Canetti states throughout *Crowds and Power*, the confrontation

between the living and the dead, between all the living and all the dead, is already decided. Defeat expresses the unbreakable frontier that Canetti finds so mortifying:

I find despicable the priests of all religions who cannot bring back the dead. They do nothing but consolidate a frontier that no one can cross. They administer what is lost in such a way that it remains lost. They promise a pilgrimage to an unknown place to conceal their impotence. They are happy that the dead do not return. They keep them on the other side. (*El libro contra la muerte* 94)

Rejection of religion as a field of acceptance of death, of a death that Canetti cannot accept because of the stigma of being on this side of here, with the guilt that those who reside in the hereafter will never return. Perennial guilt of the survivor before the unbreakable boundary that separates life and death, preventing any dialectical synthesis, any real recovery of the deceased: “This unshakable sensation of enduring, not diminished by any death [...] How many dead is one capable of enduring when one has definitively refused to accept the abjection of survival?” (179, 200).

In *Hegel, Death and Sacrifice*, George Bataille takes up Alexandre Kojève’s renowned interpretation of *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, stressing that in it the negativity of death, which “is the most dreadful thing”, acquires a fundamental place in the unfolding of consciousness and of the real: “The spirit [says Hegel] only conquers its truth when it is capable of finding itself in the absolute tearing apart” (21). But Hegel did not know to what extent he was right, for if indeed death is the source of meaning, of objectivity and of history —let us remember: knowledge is placed on a par with death precisely where the master triumphs by

enduring the anguish of looking it in the face, and it is thus, torn, confronting the negative, that an economy of life, a conservation, is established; it is, thus, that history begins—; if death is therefore the source of meaning, it constitutes at the same time the ultimate threat to the field of meaning. Or, as Derrida says, commenting on Bataille's essay:

The blind task of Hegelianism, around which the representation of meaning can be organized, is that point at which destruction, suppression, death, sacrifice, constitute such an irreversible expenditure, such a radical negativity—it must be said without reservation—that they can no longer even be determined in terms of negativity in a process or in a system: the point at which there is no longer either process or system. (355)

We believe, as we have been suggesting, that Canetti in his notes displays a particular sensibility for death as an expense without return, for a certain impossibility—which was already implicit in the key notion of “survival at a temporal distance” in *Masa y poder* (245)—of making the dead return, of giving their death a meaning that counteracts, in a certain way, the density of their departure. The critique of dialectics is directed, as we anticipated, in this direction:

There is nothing to do, nothing at all, with dialectics as Hegel understands it.

After all, this has to do with a fundamental and irreversible fact that is the basis of everything: death.

A philosophy that is oriented in a real and not only apparent way by death cannot only be dialectical.

Death does not contain life, it does not become life. It is clear, definite, infertile and does not allow itself to be persuaded by anything. The lower life does not point to death, does not know it, does not lead to it. (*El libro contra la muerte* 147)

And if from this fundamental error of being “apparently” oriented by death, of not knowing to what extent it is a fundamental and irreversible fact, political theories are derived, then the latter should return, rethink that which is the basis of everything:

I am more and more convinced that the political theories of the 19th century -I mean all its political theories- are wrong and false. And this does not mean, by any means, that they should be improved or supplemented: they are false at their roots. It is evident in the theories of the greatest significance for the future, namely, those derived from Hegel (146-147).

The Death of the Other

Canetti undoubtedly shows, in the notes, a primacy of the death of the other, to which the guilty survivor has always felt indebted, long before his own death. A series of his reflections thus points to the priority of the death of others over one's own:

I swear that even my life is indifferent to me. I swear to be willing to disappear on the spot and without leaving a trace, so that no one will know about it, if in return a war does not break out, I am willing to make this deal. I am ready for such a deal. To what instance shall I turn? Is there no god for it? (66)

There is a tension in Canetti between the centrality of the death of the other and the death of the self (“Anonymising Identifying Information”), for in truth all Canetti's writing is

mobilized by the ethical question of the salvation of others: “And although it must come to me soon [Canetti confesses], what outrages me most is that others suffer death” (218).

Closeness, thus, with Emmanuel Levinas (1993, 2005) in his critique of Martin Heidegger, where death as such always appears, first, as the death of the other—and not as one’s own (Derrida, 2006). This is, indeed, the interpretation of Byung-Chul Han: “Canetti will emphasize without further ado Levinas’ thesis that primary death is the death of the other, that death means being for the other [...] The death spoken of here is not my death, but the death of others” (250). Canetti actively and innocently seeks not to be associated with any philosophical tradition, but in Han’s favor, it must be said that, in a note written two years before his death, Canetti confesses to having been surprised when reading Levinas, identifying almost completely with his phrase:

In the book that was just brought to me from Paris I find this sentence that could be mine: “The fear of the death of the other is undoubtedly the basis of the responsibility for him”.

I know nothing about Levinas, I know nothing more than his appearance. To this day, his coming from Heidegger has haunted me. Then, in the last dialogue of the book I find the sentence I have just quoted. (*El libro contra la muerte* 306-307)

The discussion on the primacy of one’s own death or the death of others, in which Canetti now seems to lean towards the latter, is at the most intimate fibers of the theoretical-political question about the relationship that every community establishes with death. Because the end of the other, where it always comes first, makes the enigma of death as such the possibility of questioning

this impossible bond: what binds me to the other who is gone or will be gone forever, and whom I will never see again? Like Judith Butler (2010), who in *Frames of War* finds in the anterior future of mourning the foundation of the humanity of the other, is not the radical fact of death always at stake here as the one that constitutes beforehand the very temporal framework of any community, in a time that, by definition, never arrives?

Implicitly and explicitly, Canetti has separated himself, in all his notes and writings, from his vision of Heidegger and all that *Kriegsideologie* that prioritized —and to a certain extent magnified— the acceptance of death itself (Losurdo, 2003). Consent of death that he knew very well, not only for having been a contemporary of the great wars of the last century, but also for being a great *connoisseur* of the German language in which he always wrote. Canetti's preoccupation with death always seems to start from the subject's heartbreak at the death of others, and even, with it, at the death of everyone and everyone else, at the friend's or the enemy's.

Resistance against death conveys the impression that it is only about death itself. That would be too little. It would be nothing. How to make it evident, beyond any doubt, that it is about death in general and perhaps less about the very short duration of life than about the effect of death, which is toxic? (231)

Honest and true nobility of an unreserved ethics: Canetti would give his life, even to the detriment of his dreams of immortality, to save that of any other: “I would rather give up my own life entirely than give up, even if only hypothetically, that of any other” (*El libro contra la muerte* 61). One of the powers of Canetti's reflection on death is precisely this link between the singular and

the universal, for the radical fact of death implies that every other is radically other; every death embodies the problem of death as such, or, to put it in his terms, of death in general.

Conclusions

Throughout this article, we have focused on the ways in which, in Canetti's notes and aphorisms, death appears as what we call "radical fact". Thus, we first presented a limited series of previous interpretations which, emphasizing the idea of metamorphosis as the vital emancipatory capacity of the subject, celebrating the eschatological "dying with the dead", or underlying the political-institutional channeling of the negativity of death, canceled from our point of view the mysterious dimension of death in Canetti and, with it, a series of fundamental questions of his thought. Thus, in critical opposition to these latter positions, we studied various passages of Canetti's Notes, to see how in them the radicality of death appeared successively linked to a certain notion of mystery (which, in opposition to the "problem", explicitly counterposes its approach to other kinds of disciplinary approaches) and, with it, to a series of questions revolving around the absolute loss of the other, the responsibility for his death and for his salvation, and, ultimately, the ethical primacy of his death over the death of the self.

In short, by virtue of what has been exposed, it could be argued that, throughout Canetti's work, death reveals itself as a political issue, not so much because it is an instrument of politics, but because it is linked to that set of interrogations that, insofar as they emerge from its radical negativity, from the non-return waste of the subjects that belong to a given political community, challenge

the closure of meaning —historical, political, cultural— and thus determine the ethical need to place the question of the death of the other at the very heart of life in common.

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