

The Grotesque Masks of Elias Canetti: Monads with no Doors or Windows

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As hunters, they know the true shape of the eagle's beak, or the beaver's ears, much better than any of us. But they regard one such feature as quite sufficient. A mask with an eagle's beak *is* an eagle.

E. H. Gombrich, *The Story of Art*

For Elias Canetti, a German language author, born in Bulgaria, and later a British citizen, comedy was always an important tool to express himself. He indeed dealt with this topic from different points of view, moving smoothly between practice and theory. On the one hand, as a writer and playwright, he created comic characters and situations; on the other hand, he reflected on the archaic gesture of laughter according to a literary, sociological, and anthropological perspective. In this way he proved once again his eccentricity towards the tradition.

Similarly to Kafka, who was convinced that «a book must be the axe for the frozen sea inside us» and that «we ought to read only the kind of books that wound and stab us»¹, Canetti points out the important function of those literary works which can overwhelm the reader. Such great power of literature is often represented as a physical one that

¹ «Ein Buch muß die Axt sein für das gefrorene Meer in uns» and «man sollte überhaupt nur solche Bücher lesen, die einen beißen und stechen» (Kafka 1975: 27-28). Unless otherwise noted translations into English are mine.

shakes and penetrates human bodies². More specifically he says about comedy:

Die Komödie lebt für mich, wie zur Zeit ihres Beginns bei Aristophanes, von ihrem *allgemeinen* Interesse, vom Blick auf die Welt in ihren größeren Zusammenhängen. Mit diesen aber soll sie kühn schalten und walten, sich Einfälle erlauben, die bis an die Grenzen des Wahnwitzes gehen, verknüpfen, trennen, abwandeln, konfrontieren, zu neuen Einfällen neue Strukturen finden, sich nicht wiederholen und nicht billig gehen, vom Zuschauer das Letzte verlangen, ihn schütteln, hernehmen und erschöpfen³. (Canetti 1982: 56)

To achieve through comedy what is proposed in the above quoted passage, that is, to shock the spectator and to confront him with a radically different perspective on the world, Canetti uses often the grotesque. As noted by Michail Bachtin, the grotesque involves laughter and its capacity to release emotions⁴. In fact, in Canetti's work, besides the link to comic, laughter has also a terrible, uncanny and creepy appearance. This disquieting side of laughter often leads to unheard of violence on the edge of madness, as well as to that «existential and daily grotesque, which can only provoke a bitter laugh» (Minois 2002: 649). Therefore, we are confronted with a grotesque much closer to the

² I recall that Canetti often describes cuttings, amputations and wounds in his works. Wounds embody a deep fear, often irrational; it is the fear of castration, or to be more precise, the fear of being deprived of those qualities which define identity. Yet, wounds may show also a positive side, a creative one. For this see Reinhardt 2012: 357-366 and Reinhardt 2014: 255-264.

³ «Comedy lives for me, as when it began with Aristophanes, from its universal interest, its view of the world in larger contexts. However, it should deal boldly with these contexts, indulge in brainstorming that verge on madness, connect, separate, vary, confront, find new structures for new brainstorming, never repeat itself and never become shoddy, demand the utmost from the spectator, shake him, take him, and drain him» (Canetti 1999: 53-54).

⁴ Bachtin 1968; see also Minois 2002.

description provided by Wolfgang Kayser. Starting from ancient painting and going on to modern literature, he shows a grotesque which becomes an expression of social alienation. In his view, those categories that usually are used to interpret reality fail before the grotesque ⁵. In sum, as well explained by H. Dorowin in his essay entitled *A Grotesque World Theatre: The Viennese Comedies of Elias Canetti (Un Teatro del Mondo grottesco: le commedie viennesi di Elias Canetti)*, the grotesque, if properly defined, can be considered as «the unifying stylistic element of Canetti's whole work, from *Auto-da-Fé* until the last posthumous notes» (Dorowin 2006: 155).

Hit by this overflowing aesthetic of the grotesque, painfully comic, the reader or viewer, in the words of Canetti, "shaken, taken, and drained", in his turn, has a powerful tool in order to react: laughter. Canetti goes back to the archaic essence of laughter and shows the deep similarities with the act of eating. He considers the gesture of gulping down food as an act of incorporation⁶, that is the first form of power and oppression. Thus, laughter reveals a disquieting side to the extent that comedy appears irremediably linked to horror. Canetti experienced this deep connection between comedy and horror the first time he went to a public reading of one of his biggest idols, Karl Kraus⁷. The young Canetti was immediately struck by the extraordinary metamorphic ability of the voice of this master of grotesque satire and bitter laughter. But, even more, he was astonished by the reaction of the audience. Before this tyrant of the word and this scourge of all mankind the spectators seemed to have only one possibility of resistance: through laughter. Canetti recalled the episode in the second volume of his autobiography, *The Torch in My Ear*:

⁵ Kayser 1957.

⁶ Canetti 1980.

⁷ For the influence of Karl Kraus on Canetti see the reflections of the author himself in Canetti 1981: 42-53 and Canetti 1981: 247-271.

Von Anfang an und während der ganzen Veranstaltung war es die Stille vor einem Sturm. Schon die erste Pointe, eigentlich war es nur eine Anspielung, wurde durch ein Gelächter vorweggenommen, das mich erschreckte. Es klang begeistert und fanatisch, befriedigt und drohend zugleich, es kam, bevor noch eigentlich ausgesprochen war, worum es ging. [...] Es waren nicht einzelne, die lachten, sondern viele zusammen. [...] Immer waren es viele und immer war es ein hungriges Lachen. Ich hatte bald heraus, daß die Leute zu einem Mahl gekommen waren und nicht, um Karl Kraus zu feiern⁸. (Canetti 1982: 71)

Describing the terrifying and hungry laughter of the audience provoked by Kraus's words, Canetti detects on the one hand the possibility for the individuals to defend themselves by resorting to the act of laughing, on the other hand he highlights the menacing side of laughter. This idea he explains in detail in his masterpiece *Crowds and Power*:

Das *Lachen* ist als vulgär beanstanden worden, weil man dabei den Mund weit öffnet und die Zähne entblößt. Gewiß enthält das Lachen in seinem Ursprung die Freude an einer Beute oder Speise, die einem als sicher erscheint. Ein Mensch, der fällt, erinnert an ein Tier, auf das man aus war und das man selber zu Fall gebracht hat. Jeder Sturz, der Lachen erregt, erinnert an die Hilflosigkeit des Gestürzten; man könnte es, wenn man wollte, als Beute behandeln. Man würde *nicht* lachen, wenn man in der Reihe der geschilderten Vorgänge weitergehen und sich's wirklich einverleiben würde.

⁸ «From the start, and throughout the performance, it was the quiet before a storm. His very first punchline, really just an allusion, was anticipated by a laughter that terrified me. It sounded enthusiastic and fanatic, satisfied and ominous at once; it came before he had actually made his point. [...] It wasn't individuals who were laughing, it was many people together. [...] It was always many people, and it was always a hungry laughter. It soon dawned on me that the people had come to a repast and not to celebrate Karl Kraus» (Canetti 1999: 70-71).

Man lacht, *anstatt* es zu essen. Die entgangene Speise ist es, die zum Lachen reizt; das plötzliche Gefühl der Überlegenheit, wie schon Hobbes gesagt hat. [...] Es scheint, daß die Bewegungen, die vom Zwerchfell ausgehen und fürs Lachen charakteristisch sind, eine Reihe von inneren Schlingbewegungen des Leibes zusammenfassend ersetzen⁹. (Canetti 1980: 262)

According to Canetti, laughter is a complex phenomenon which involves different feelings: it is vulgar, but it also gives pleasure, the pleasure of superiority. Yet, humans have learned to substitute with a symbolic act, that is laughter, the aggressiveness of the process of incorporation through eating. However, the relationships between individuals appear to be demonstrations of power based on the archaic paradigm of hunting¹⁰. Therefore, in the light of the above, when Kraus set himself up as a supreme judge, at the same time, he suffered a symbolic attack from the audiences when they laughed. Precisely these power relations Canetti tries to describe using the stylistic features of the grotesque.

⁹ «*Laughter* has been objected to as vulgar because, in laughing, the mouth is opened wide and the teeth are shown. Originally laughter contained a feeling of pleasure in prey or food which seemed certain. A human being who falls down reminds us of an animal we might have hunted and brought down ourselves. Every sudden fall which arouses laughter does so because it suggests helplessness and it reminds us that the fallen can, if we want, be treated as prey. If we went further and actually ate it, we would not laugh. We laugh *instead* of eating it. Laughter is our physical reaction to the escape of potential food. As Hobbes said, laughter expresses a sudden feeling of superiority, but he did not add that it only occurs when the normal consequences of this superiority do not ensue. [...] It is as though the whole interior process of gulping down food could be summed up and replaced by those movements of the diaphragm which are characteristic of laughter» (Canetti 1984: 223).

¹⁰ For the use of the paradigm of hunting in Canetti's work see Timmermann 1997, <http://www.freilach.com/Literatur/CANETTI.HTM> (ultimo accesso 15/04/2016).

Returning to the fascination exerted on him by Kraus, Canetti sees that the power of his oratory relies mainly on the use of "acoustic quotes", i.e. his ability to transform printed words into sounding words (Canetti 1981: 45); that means that he filled them with bodily presence linked to people in flesh and bones¹¹. The second key point of Kraus's speech detected by Canetti is his ability to arouse horror (Canetti 1981: 45). On the basis of these considerations Canetti developed his idea of the acoustic mask. Hunting for voices in his Viennese wanderings, in nightclubs and in the taverns of the suburbs, on trams, and in the streets, Canetti gives life to those which he theorizes and defines precisely as "acoustic masks". In a famous interview of 1937 (Canetti – Durzak 1975: 515) he explains in detail his theory. In his view, everyone speaks not only a particular language such as his mother tongue or a certain dialect, but his way of speaking is the result of a combination of factors that mark each single person exactly like a fingerprint. According to this perspective, the speech of each individual, which draws on an average vocabulary of about 500 words, chosen on the basis of specific combinations, is characterized by a precise rhythm, speed and tone, and can be distinguished by the recurrence of a series of words and sayings (*ibid.*). Through acoustic masks, mostly present in his Viennese production that includes his first novel *Auto-da-Fé* and two dramas, *The Wedding (Hochzeit)* and *The Comedy of Vanity (Komödie der Eitelkeit)*¹², Canetti expresses contents which – to put it in Kraus's words – arouse horror. First of all the voice, body expression of the uniqueness of an individual, petrifies into a mask, losing part of its humanity. Precisely this contrast¹³ between the bodily substance and its petrification defines the Canettian grotesque. Thus, comedy is mixed again in a symbiotic way to the terrible and the frightening (Barnouw 1996: 116).

¹¹ Peter von Matt writes in his book about Canetti (Matt 2007: 38) «Die Worte waren körperhaft», «The words were corporeal».

¹² These first three works represent a first separated unit. See for instance Burgstaller 1974: 101.

¹³ The contrast of heterogeneous elements is one of the main features of the grotesque (Pietzcker 1980: 89).

Moreover, the stiffness of an acoustic mask in relation to that of other acoustic masks highlights a further terrible truth: the absolute inability of individuals to communicate. Thanks to Kraus, Canetti acknowledged firstly "that each man has his own linguistic identity in order to distinguish him from everyone else"; but secondly he also understood that:

[...] Menschen zwar zueinander sprechen, aber sich nicht verstehen; daß ihre Worte Stöße sind, die an den Worten der anderen abprallen; daß es keine größere Illusion gibt als die Meinung, Sprache sei ein Mittel der Kommunikation zwischen Menschen. Man spricht zum andern, aber so, daß er einen nicht versteht. Man spricht weiter, und er versteht noch weniger. Man schreit, er schreit zurück, die Ejakulation, die in der Grammatik ein kümmerliches Dasein fristet, bemächtigt sich der Sprache. Wie Bälle springen die Ausrufe hin und her, erteilen ihre Stöße und fallen zu Boden. Selten dringt etwas in den anderen ein, und wenn es doch geschieht, dann etwas Verkehrtes¹⁴.

The lack of communication expressed by Canetti on the acoustic level is particularly evident in the above-mentioned plays, such as *The Wedding* and the *The Comedy of Vanity*. The different characters speak without understanding each other. Everyone remains anchored to his own perspective, which often takes the shape of an absolutely insane and fixed idea. Therefore, «what remains is a dialogue between

¹⁴ «[...] men speak, yes, with one another, but they don't understand each other; so their words are blows which bounce off of other people's words; there is no greater illusion than the conviction that language is a means of communication between men. One talks to another, but in a way he doesn't understand. One continues to speak, and he understands even less. One yells, and yells again, and the exclamation, which in grammar lives a poor life, seizes the language. The shouts bounce here and there like balls; they strike and fall to the ground. Rarely does anything sink in, and when it happens it is something distorted» (Canetti, 1981:48). Translated into English by Dee Morton-Rossi.

monads» (Licciardi 2010: 9) recorded with coldness by Canetti. This distance in observing human communication is a feature that recalls his past studies in chemistry. While the content of the plays is terrible, since the monads clash against one another and push each other towards a catastrophe (Zagari 1973: 315), on the other hand the effect produced, however terrible, is laughter. These dialogues, which proceed on parallel tracks without ever meeting and in doing so become exemplary models of human incommunicability, are of great comedy.

However, Canetti's insistence on the acoustic element of his masks and on the importance of the voice has made us forget that, after all, the acoustic experience in the strict sense is relegated to his stay in Vienna and appears clearly in his plays. Instead, a reflection on the masks from a broader perspective reveals far more complex traits. A detailed analysis on masks is located inside his anthropological essay *Crowds and Power*. Peter von Matt goes so far as to claim that in truth every significant thought of the writer takes the form of a mask, in other words of something that you can feel and see, before which either you shiver or you laugh (Matt 2007: 37-38). I should also add, that often you do both: you shudder and you laugh. Therefore, in Canetti's works we are indeed faced with grotesque masks, yet, to quote Youssef Ishaghpour, the meaning of grotesque needs to be understood in a modern sense, because of this inextricable mingling between the comic and the horrific¹⁵, within which the representation of the body appears substantially. The use of the grotesque mask in its expression both acoustic and visual¹⁶ is particularly outstanding in Canetti's novel *Auto-da-Fé*. In fact, the sculptured characters look like «figures cut in wood, with a strong visual presence and physiognomy, but you still can feel the traces of the knife, the scrapes» (Ishaghpour 1990: 55).

¹⁵ Ishaghpour emphasizes the inextricable mingling between the comic and the horrific (Ishaghpour 1990: 54).

¹⁶ Sylvia Werner (2013) talks about "visuelle Masken", "visual masks". For the visual elements in Canetti's work see also van Meeuwen 1988. See also the chapter dedicated by Helmut Göbel to Canetti and his relationship to visual arts (Göbel 2005: 88-94).

Very significantly, according to Hans Belting, the mask is a *pars pro toto* of the transformation of our body into an image¹⁷. The mask shows its proximity to the body and to death, as «the mask is face, human aspect, representation; but it is something material, rigid, unalterable, as if it's dead» (Pizzorno 2008: 27).

In *Auto-da-Fé* Canetti depicts with utmost accuracy extreme characters which actually populate the world, in order to describe a complex reality shattered into thousand pieces. But this fragmentation needs to be expressed in a clear and understandable way (Canetti 1981: 235-246). All the characters of the novel, which are «next to each other, and each one separated from the other» (*ibid.*), are shaped into three-dimensional figures with precise features (Zagari 1973: 319). Alongside the acoustic characterizations, the somatic ones clearly stand out, due to suggestions that derive directly from the visual arts, in particular from paintings by Goya and Brueghel (Matt 2007: 16). On the basis of these influences Canetti creates his grotesque visions: the long and skinny body of the protagonist, the sinologist and book lover Kien, an asparagus; the blue, starched skirt of his housekeeper and then wife, Therese, a shell; the hump of the Jew dwarf Fischerle; the red fist of the brutish concierge Benedikt Pfaff. Also the other characters of the novel are similarly characterized, because even minor ones are evoked «with a persistent overabundance of details» (Zagari 1973: 319).

Trapped in the repetition of thoughts and mechanical movements of their bodies, they too, just like the characters of the plays, are completely unable to communicate. The only common ground is that of the supremacy of one over the other, marked by the possession, above all material and sexual. Impenetrable and inhuman through their masks, yet, they show their fragility at the moment of physical contact; a contact that is always traumatic and aims at penetrating and cutting the body (Reinhardt 2012: 357-366), or rather at its destruction. And the fear of being touched, as we know from *Crowds and Power*, is the greatest fear of humankind. Especially frightening is the idea of being touched by somebody or something unknown. Thus, man always tends to avoid

¹⁷ See Belting 2002.

physical contact with anything strange. Moreover, Canetti points out that «even clothes give insufficient security: it is easy to tear them and pierce through to the naked, smooth, defenseless flesh of the victim» (Canetti 1984:15)¹⁸.

At this point it may be helpful to propose some examples of the deep fragility of human bodies when they are touched. In Canetti's *Auto-da-Fé* physical contact seems to have always devastating consequences. I recall for instance the episode in which the fake blind man kills in a fierce way the hunchback dwarf Fischerle. Wanting to take revenge of the last of many offenses, the fake blind man beats with his fist the skull of the dwarf; then with an old bread knife he removes the hump, wraps it in the coat flaps, spits several times on the packet and leaves it on the floor. Finally, he throws the corpse under the bed and he jumps on the wife of the dwarf to make love with her all night.

Also, the housekeeper and then wife of Kien, Therese, exasperated by her constant struggle to assert her insatiable lust for possessions, exerts violence against the husband's body. She strikes him with her hands, fists, feet, in short, she fights with all her strength. Although Kien has become so small as to disappear even to himself (Canetti 1995: 173), he deludes himself in believing to be able to contrast the brute force of his wife through the power of thought. Kien is convinced that he is capable to transform his body into stone, an attempt that will turn out as a failure at the next bunch of blows received by his wife. Finally, Kien dissolves his bodily integrity putting himself on fire together with his beloved library.

Very significantly the novel ends with Kien laughing; the disquieting aspect of laughter emerges once again, this time connected to the horror of madness and death. Kien *laughs* out loud, «louder than he had ever *laughed* in all his life» (Canetti 1995: 464). In this way Kien turns into a diabolically grotesque mask, visually characterized by fire

¹⁸ «Nicht einmal die Kleider gewähren einem Sicherheit genug; wie leicht sind sie zu zerreißen, wie leicht ist es, bis zum nackten, glatten, wehrlosen Fleisch des Angegriffenen durchzudringen» (Canetti 1980:13).

and acoustically by a powerful laughter, the laugh of the madman. After all, in the words of Foucault, «when the madman laughs, he already laughs with the laugh of death; the lunatic, anticipating the macabre, has disarmed it» (Foucault 2001: 13).

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