
Elias Canetti

Auto da fé

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Description

"Auto-da-Fé" is the story of Peter Kien, a distinguished, reclusive sinologist living in Germany between the wars. With masterly precision, Canetti reveals Kien's character, displaying the flawed personal relationships which ultimately lead to his destruction.

Manipulated by his illiterate and grasping housekeeper, Therese, who has tricked him into marriage, and Benedikt Pfaff, a brutish concierge, Kien is forced out of his apartment - which houses his great library and one true passion - and into the underworld of the city. In this purgatory he is guided by a chess-playing dwarf of evil propensities, until he is eventually restored to his home. But on his return he is visited by his brother, an eminent psychiatrist who, by an error of diagnosis, precipitates the final crisis...

"Auto-da-Fé" was first published in Germany in 1935 as "Die Blendung" ("The Blinding" or "Bedazzlement") and later in Britain in 1947, where the publisher noted Canetti as a 'writer of strongly individual genius, which may prove influential', an observation borne out when the author was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1981. "Auto-da-Fé" still towers as one of the greatest novels of the twentieth century, and Canetti's incisive vision of an insular man battling against the outside world is as fresh and rewarding today as when first it appeared in print.

Insightful reviews

Eirin: [DISCLAIMER: The two stars I'm giving this book does not reflect the quality of the work, but my experience of it. I wish there was an additional star or something, for books that you can see are good, but just does not suit your tastes.]

I could not finish it. I've been trudging through it since August, it is now December, and I've only gotten halfway. The first hundred pages I liked, and read quickly. After that however, it just got harder and harder to summon up the will to read. Every time I picked it up I read a few pages, found myself bored and uninterested, and put it down again to go read something else.

It's a shame, because I can see that it is at times well written, and there are several really good parts, but I can't help it: I find it inexplicably dull. The prose is extremely dense, yet little happens at all, and the characters are just... boring. I suppose they are meant to be, you aren't really supposed to feel sympathy for any of them, so that worked, I guess. It just made the novel even more unreadable for my part.

Canetti drags out details and minute scenes into several pages - sometimes chapters! - and while this can be done very successfully (see Nicholson Baker), Canetti does not manage to hold my interest while doing it. He also spends a lot of time in the head of his characters, both detailing dreams (which I hate in a novel, it seems like a silly trick most of the time) and thoughts. In a few parts this is well done - Canetti manages to show the lunacy of his characters in an original manner, where I was delighted by the flow of the prose. Most of the time however, I'm just bored. Bored, bored, bored.

I have, even though I hate doing it, decided to leave it unfinished, because I can't keep up reading a book that bores me to tears (especially such a long book, with such tiny typeface!). It's a waste of time, time I could spend reading other, more interesting books. I might come back to it one day, so I've marked my place, but for now, it'll stay half-unread.

Joshua: If you are 300 pages into this novel, keep reading, it gets better, much better. If you are thinking of starting this novel today, think carefully and know that you do not have my recommendation. I struggled quite a bit with this book. The three star rating is a compromise between the 1 and 2 star rating I was certain I would give this book until about page 380 (after which we are clearly in at least 4 star territory) when I finally encountered some lyricism in Canetti's prose, a likable character, and something more than a bunch of solipsistic maniacs bumping into one another and bickering over money.

I disagree with the comparisons in the Goodreads description to Hermann Broch and Robert Musil. I think a more apt comparison would be Samuel Beckett, but don't get too excited yet. For the first two thirds of this book Canetti wrote about in a sparse prose style about odd and delusional characters in rather mundane domestic situations. The problem is that while Beckett's sparse prose has an elemental force behind it and still manages to conjure seriously rich imagery, Canetti's prose lacks this driving force and conjuring ability. The terse sentences reflect the characters' scattered and shallow thoughts and fail to achieve anything more than a fairly comprehensive portrait of several extremely unlikable characters.

Also the depiction of women through the guise of Peter Kein's wife and the disgust for all women and their mental faculties shared by a majority of the male characters in this novel was quite disconcerting and I'm not convinced Canetti took sufficient steps to distinguish the fictional biases of his characters from his implied own. I don't know anything about the author personally but this novel has a strongly misogynistic theme, supported by a wide cast of characters, that is hardly rebutted by the assumption that the views are too extreme to have belonged to the author.

Here's the thing though, at some point, the language really began to click and Canetti elevated his writing to whole other level. I have the exact page and passage marked and will share below. The main character Kien, wants to believe his wife is now dead. She is symbolized throughout the novel by her starched blue skirt. In an effort to purge his reality of all thoughts of his wife, Kien attempts to eradicate the very existence of the color blue:

"The logical argument against the existence of blue is further strengthened by the empirical. with closed eyes, Kien sought some image which in the general opinion would be described as blue. He saw the sea. A pleasing light rises from it, tree-tops with the wind passing over them. Not in vain do poets, standing upon a summit, compare the woods below them to the sea. They do it again and again. They cannot avoid certain similes. There is a deeper reason for this. Poets are men of the senses. They see the wood. it is green. In their recollection another image wakens, no less vast, no less green: the sea. so the sea is green. Over it is the vault of the sky. It is full of clouds - they are black and heavy. A storm is rising. But it cannot break.

nowhere is the sky blue. the day passes. How the hours hasten! Why? Who is chasing them? May not a man see the skies before nightfall, see their accursed colour? It is a lie. Towards evening the clouds part. A sharp red breaks through. Where is the blue? Everywhere is burns, red, red, red! Then night comes. One more successful revelation. No one doubted the red."

After this passage, the book really took off for me. Canetti sustained the imagery he established above, extended it, and wrote with a previously undetected and much appreciated lyricism. The final portions of this novel assure that Canetti had the powers of a supreme writing. I wonder if Canetti only came upon these powers in the midst of writing this, his only novel. It's a shame that the qualities that Canetti's writing exhibits in the end of this book do not pervade the entire novel - if they had I'm sure this piece would rise through the ranks and rival many of my favorites. Ultimately, however, despite the pleasant taste left in my mouth by the ending, I was disappointed with this book and have quite mixed feelings about recommending it to any but the most serious and patient of readers.

Olivia: The absurdity of man. A theme which has been emptied onto thousands and thousands of pages by just as many authors. And to this day, the one book I've read which has given me the most haunting and darkly humorous experience of it, is *Auto-da-Fé*.

This book is bizarre. At some parts, the misanthropic bibliophile and main character Peter Kien read almost like a parody of myself. This was both funny and frightening, much like the rest of the book. There is a continuous tug of war going on in the psyches of the people described here. They are people that declare how much they love, and crave, truth, but seldom if ever make use of it themselves. Nothing is real, every little occurrence is completely abandoned to the perception of the onlookers, and let's just say that they never have an unbiased eye. The human mind is fascinatingly captured by Canetti, steadily balancing between parody and the absolutely absurd, but with a sufficiently big grain of truth to make the reader uncomfortable. Very uncomfortable. Another reviewer described this book as "emotionally draining", and I can't do anything else than agree. Reading this was hard, not because of the text itself, but because of its implications.

Canetti's world is a psychological nightmare. Every single person has a wall up against the world, made of their own dreams and intentions, and these walls allow no simple communication between people whatsoever. Every piece of information is remoulded to fit the workings of each person's mind. If we're unlucky (and I was), we start to recognise glimpses of ourselves and of our world. The proud and reserved judgement of Kien was a little too close to my own, and his brother's egotistic fascination with other people's ills burned with recognition. This is not a book that will make you happy. It will fascinate you and scare you, and in my case, enthrall. I closed this book completely exhausted, and that's a good thing.

When it comes to writing, Canetti doesn't disappoint. There is a part I really fell in love with, where Kien recounts his experiences through metaphor, using years and years of Greek mythology as reference. Through the greek goddesses, he preaches the cruelty of women in general, and his wife in particular. The book is saturated with other books, using some of the greatest minds of history to express itself. It keeps *Auto-da-Fé* interesting, even in the parts where it stagnates a bit (it is a long book, after all). Somewhere around the middle, I started to

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