Thoughts on the Writings of Elias Canetti

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Elias Canetti (1905-1994), a Bulgarian-born Sephardic Jew, won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1981. He spent part of his youth in Manchester, England, but after the untimely death of his father, his mother took her three sons to Vienna. In 1938, Canetti escaped Europe and Nazi persecution and settled in England. Known as a modernist novelist, playwright, and memoirist, he was a keen observer of human behavior.

In his memoir, The Torch in My Ear, he reflected on an insight that came to him as a young man: “I realized that there is such a thing as a crowd instinct, which is always in conflict with the personality instinct, and that the struggle between the two of them can explain the course of human history” (The Memoirs of Elias Canetti, p. 387).This idea became central to Canetti’s life, ultimately resulting in his classic book Crowds and Power.

What is the “crowd instinct?” It is the desire to blend into a crowd, to dissolve one’s personality into a large mass of people. The crowd instinct can be witnessed in sports’ arenas, where fans become one with each other and with the players on the field. It can be experienced in mass rallies where fiery orators fire up the crowd, or at rock concerts where fans lose themselves in their wild admiration of the singers and their music. People have a deep desire to be part of such crowds.

Yet, crowds can become dangerous. When individuals succumb to crowds, demagogues can control them, can drive them to do terrible things, can turn

them into lynch mobs or murderous gangs, and can push them into terrorism and war.

So we also have a “personality instinct,” a deep desire to retain our own ideas and values, to resist the mesmerizing power of crowds. Although we at times want to share in the enthusiasms and griefs of crowds, we simultaneously want to maintain our inner freedom from the crowds. We want to blend in…but not to blend in.

Leadership entails working with crowds, striving to create consensus among various factions. Nations demand patriotism, national symbols that inspire citizens to feel united with each other. But nations can become dangerous crowds. Demagogues can manipulate the crowd’s emotions and can control information that they share with the masses.

How can one resist the power of crowds? For this we need the personality instinct. Each person needs to understand the crowd, but keep enough independence not to totally succumb to the power of the crowd. Each person literally has to be a hero, has to be willing to stand up and stand out…and possibly take terrible risks in order to maintain personal integrity.

Throughout human history, there has been an ongoing tension between the crowd instinct and the personality instinct. Too often, the crowd instinct has prevailed. Masses of people have been whipped up to commit the worst atrocities, to murder innocents, to vent hatred.

In our time, like throughout history, there are those who seek to manipulate crowds in dangerous, murderous and hateful ways. There are those who play on the fears and gullibility of the masses, who dissolve individuality and turn people into frenzied sheep.

But there are also those who refuse to become part of such crowds, who resist the crowd instinct and maintain the personality instinct. These are the stars who will form a new kind of crowd, a crowd that will bring human beings together in harmony and mutual respect.

An ever-present problem for people is putting on symbolic masks, pretending to be what they are not. In their desire to blend in or to control, they take on artificial poses in order to manipulate others.

In describing the impact of a mask on its wearer, Canetti notes: “As long as he wears it he is two things, himself and the mask…Because it can be torn away, its

wearer is bound to fear for it. He must take care that he does not lose it; it must never be dropped and must never open. He feels every kind of anxiety about what may happen to it.…He must manipulate it, remaining his everyday self, and, at the same time, must change into it as a performer. While he wears the mask he is thus two people and must remain two during the whole of his performance" (Crowds and Power, p. 377).

One wearing a mask wishes to preserve the illusion of being someone else. Being unmasked would ruin everything. So the mask wearer tries to protect the illusion by staying in control of the mask. No one must be allowed to get past the mask.

But what happens if the mask wearer comes to identify totally with the mask? Much human tragedy is the result of people forgetting who they are at root; they don various masks and personae. They may imagine that they can only be successful or happy if they adopt a certain persona, if they betray their selves for the sake of winning the approval of others.

People, in their desire to be popular, often end up play-acting. They dress, speak, laugh, socialize—the way they expect that others want them to dress, speak, laugh and socialize. To gain approval, they will wear whatever mask they think will advance them. The mask-wearers are terrified by those who would unmask them.

The great challenge for each human being is to be authentic, to resist wearing masks, and resist those who attempt to manipulate us by donning masks of their own. The great challenge to society are those whom Canetti terms "survivors." These are individuals who cut down or out- maneuver all opponents; they survive the climb to the top of the social ladder ruthlessly. They are thirsty to rule, to control, to command. They demand total obeisance; they feel threatened by anyone who sees through their schemes.

Canetti writes: "What has radically changed in our time, however, is the situation of the survivor. …He has been glorified as a hero and obeyed as a ruler but fundamentally he is always the same. His most fantastic triumphs have taken place in our own time, among people who set great store by the idea of humanity. He is not yet extinct, nor ever will be until we have the strength to see him clearly, whatever disguise he assumes and whatever his halo of glory. The survivor is mankind's worst evil, its curse and perhaps its doom. Is it possible for us to escape him, even now at this last moment?" (Ibid., p. 468).

Even an observer less gifted than Canetti would have noticed the rise of Nazism and Fascism sweeping through Europe. The mobs were incited by ruthless megalomaniac leaders; ugly crowds were forming; almost unlimited power was granted to a few leaders. The recipe for society's destruction was in place. Canetti identified the problem, but could do nothing to prevent the inevitable catastrophe. He fled to England where he survived the war.

Although anti-Semites spoke about "the Jews" as if all Jews were cut of the same cloth, Canetti emphasized the tremendous diversity among Jews. In recounting his visit to the Jewish Quarter in Marrakesh, Morocco, he wrote: " I walked past as slowly as possible and looked at the faces. Their heterogeneity was astonishing. There were faces that in other clothing I would have taken for Arab. There were luminous old Rembrandt Jews. There were Catholic priests of wily quietness and humility. There were Wandering Jews whose restlessness was written in every lineament. There were Frenchmen. There were Spaniards. There were ruddy-complexioned Russians. There was one you felt like hailing as the patriarch Abraham; he was haughtily addressing Napoleon, and a hot-tempered know-all who looked like Goebbels was trying to butt in. I thought of the transmigration of souls. Perhaps, I wondered, every human soul has to be a Jew once, and here they all are: none remembers what he was before, and even when this is so clearly revealed in his features that I, a foreigner, can recognize it, every one of these people still firmly believes he stands in direct line of descent from the people of the Bible" (The Voices of Marrakesh, p. 40).

In Crowds and Power, he made the same point. "No people is more difficult to understand than the Jews. Debarred from their country of origin, they have spread over the whole of the inhabited earth. Their talent for adaptation is well known, but the degree of their adaptation is immensely variable….Jews are different from other people, but, in reality, they are most different from each other" (Crowds and Power, pp. 178-9). Canetti points out that Jews are not a "racial" or monolithic group, but rather are united by a shared memory of the Exodus from Egypt of the ancient Israelites. That sense of being a crowd, a wandering crowd yearning for the Promised Land, has been the unifying symbol that binds Jews together.

The victimization of Jews is an example of how tyranny can prevail in whipping up masses of people to commit horrific crimes against targeted individuals or groups. As long as there are such tyrants, and as long as the masses are willing to go along with them, that is how long it will be until humanity can be redeemed from its own evils.

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When I learned in 1981 that the Nobel Prize for Literature was awarded to a Sephardic Jew of Judeo-Spanish-speaking background, I was very pleased. Being myself of Judeo-Spanish background, I felt an immediate kinship with Canetti. But after reading his various writings, I felt a huge distance between us. The “ethnic” link was shaken.

Canetti wrote in German, the language of culture that his mother instilled in him in Vienna. His major writings are on general human themes, not with any particular “Sephardic” flavor. Even his memoirs left me feeling that his Sephardic upbringing was far from traditional or representative of Sephardic civilization. But as the years have passed, I find myself feeling much closer to Canetti. I appreciate his keen insights into human motives and behaviors. I admire his close observation of people and places. With prophet-like clarity, he foresaw how humanity could destroy itself…or save itself from the brink.

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