

ELIAS CANETTI

Crowds and Power

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CROWDS AND POWER

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Winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature

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which, as a whole, have changed their faith. The return of the moment when they are needed is as certain as the appearance of new crowds, ripe for the stimulation and release which they may be precisely qualified to give. All such torpid, semi-retired groups may be brought out again and re-activated. They can be revitalized and, with minor changes of constitution, reinstated as crowd crystals. There is scarcely any major political revolution which has not on occasion remembered such old, demoted groups, seized and galvanized them, and used them so intensively that they have appeared as something completely new and dangerously active.

I shall show later how individual crowd crystals function. Only by giving concrete examples is it possible to show how they actually precipitate crowds. The crystals themselves are variously constituted and give rise, therefore, to quite different crowds. The reader will, almost imperceptibly, make the acquaintance of a number of them in the course of this enquiry.

Crowd Symbols

CROWD SYMBOLS is the name I give to collective units which do not consist of men, but which are still felt to be crowds. Corn and forest, rain, wind, sand, fire and the sea are such units. Every one of these phenomena comprehends some of the essential attributes of the crowd. Although they do not consist of men, each of them recalls the crowd and stands as symbol for it in myth, dream, speech and song.

It is desirable to distinguish sharply and clearly between these symbols and crowd crystals. A crowd crystal is a group of men which is striking because of its coherence and unity. It is imagined and experienced as a unit, but it invariably consists of real men in action: soldiers, monks, an orchestra. Crowd symbols, on the other hand, are never made up of men, and they are only *felt* to be a crowd.

It may seem, at first sight, that they are not important enough to warrant detailed examination. But it will be seen that, through them, the crowd itself can be approached in a new and profitable way. They shed a natural light on it, which it would be foolish to exclude.

Fire

The first thing to be said about fire is that it is always the same. Whether it is large or small, wherever it starts, and however long or short the time it lasts, there is in our imagination always a sameness

about it, which is independent of the particular occasion. The image of fire is like a scar, strongly marked, irremovable and precise.

Fire spreads; it is contagious and insatiable. The violence with which it seizes whole forests and steppes and cities is one of the most impressive things about it. Until its onset tree stood by tree, and house by house, each distinct and separate from the next. But fire joins what was separate, and in the shortest possible time. Isolated and diverse objects all go up in the same flames. They become so much the same that they disappear completely. Houses, trees, creatures—the fire seizes them all. It is in the highest degree contagious; over and over again one is surprised by the feebleness of the resistance it encounters. The more life a thing has, the less it can defend itself against fire; only minerals, the most lifeless of all substances, are a match for it. Its headlong ruthlessness knows no bounds; it wants to swallow up everything, and is never sated.

Fire is sudden; it can originate anywhere. No one is ever surprised when fire breaks out; here, there, or somewhere, it is always expected. Its very suddenness is impressive and people invariably search for a cause. The fact that often none can be found adds to the awe inherent in the idea of fire. It has a mysterious ubiquity; it can appear anywhere and at any time.

Fire is multiple. Not only does one know that there must be fires in many, indeed in innumerable places, but the individual fire itself is multiple: we speak of flames and of tongues of flame. In the *Vedas* fire is called "The one Agni, manifoldly ablaze".

Fire is destructive; it can be fought and tamed; it goes out. It has an elemental enemy to contend with, namely water in the form of rivers and cloudbursts. Their enmity is proverbial; the expression "fire and water" denotes animosity of the most extreme and irreconcilable kind. In ancient prefigurations of the end of the world either one or the other is victorious. The deluge ends all life by water; the universal conflagration destroys the world by fire. Sometimes they appear together in one and the same mythology, both therefore diminished. But, in this temporal existence, man has learnt to dominate fire. Not only can he always ally himself with water in the fight against it, but he has also succeeded in dividing it and in storing it thus. He keeps it captive in hearths and ovens, and feeds it as he feeds an animal; he can starve it, or he can choke it. This brings us to the last important characteristic of fire: it is treated as though it were alive. It lives restlessly, and it dies. It may be completely smothered in one place, but it will go on living in another.

If we consider the several attributes of fire together we get a surprising picture. Fire is the same wherever it breaks out: it spreads rapidly; it is contagious and insatiable; it can break out anywhere, and with great suddenness; it is multiple; it is destructive; it has an enemy; it dies; it acts as though it were alive, and is so treated. All this is true of the crowd. Indeed it would be difficult to list its attributes more accurately. Let us go through them in turn. The crowd is the same everywhere, in all periods and cultures; it remains essentially the same among men of the most diverse origin, education and language. Once in being, it spreads with the utmost violence. Few can resist its contagion; it always wants to go on growing and there are no inherent limits to its growth. It can arise wherever people are together, and its spontaneity and suddenness are uncanny. It is multiple, but cohesive. It is composed of large numbers of people, but one never knows exactly how many. It can be destructive; and it can be damped and tamed. It seeks an enemy. It dies away as quickly as it has arisen, and often as inexplicably; and it has, as goes without saying, its own restless and violent life. These likenesses between fire and the crowd have led to the close assimilation of their images; they enter into each other and can stand for each other. Fire is one of the most important and malleable of the crowd symbols which have always played a part in the history of mankind. We must now consider some of these affinities between fire and the crowd more closely.

The dangerous traits of the crowd are often pointed out and, among these, the most striking is the propensity to incendiarism. This propensity has its roots in the burning of forests. The forest, itself an age-old crowd symbol, is set on fire by men in order to create space for settlements, and there is good reason to believe that it was through the experience of such conflagrations that men learnt how to deal with fire. There is a clear prehistoric connection between forest and fire. Fields were situated in burnt-out clearings in forests and, whenever they needed to be renewed or enlarged, more forest had to be burnt.

Animals flee from the burning forest; mass fear is the natural and perpetual reaction of animals to large fires; and it was once man's reaction too. But man has taken possession of fire. He holds the fire-brand in his hand and need not fear it. His new power has overlaid his old fear, and the two of them have entered into a strange alliance.

The crowd which used to run from fire now feels strongly attracted by it. As is well known, conflagrations of all kinds have a magical effect on men. Men are not satisfied with the hearths and ovens which each domiciliary group maintains privately for itself; they want a

fire which is visible from afar, which they can all surround and where they can all be together. If the conflagration is large enough, a curious reversal of their old mass fear commands them to hurry to its site, and they feel there something of the glowing warmth which formerly united them. In periods of peace they have to go without this experience for a long time, but one of the strongest instincts of the crowd, as soon as it has formed at all, is to create such a fire for itself and to use its attraction to further its own growth.

The matchbox that modern man carries in his pocket is a small remnant of these ancient and deeply significant associations. It represents the serried tree trunks of a wood, all reduced to an agreeable uniformity, and each provided with a combustible head. It is possible to light several, or indeed all, of them together and thus create an artificial conflagration. One may feel tempted to do this, but it is not usually done, because the tiny size of the ensuing conflagration would deprive fire of all its ancient splendour.

But the attraction of fire may go even further than this. Not only do men rush to it and surround it, but there are old ceremonies by which they actually identify themselves with it. One of the finest examples of these is the famous fire-dance of the Navajo Indians.

"The Navajos of North Mexico prepare a huge fire around which they dance all night in presenting eleven distinct acts between sunset and sunrise. As soon as the disc of the sun has disappeared the performers dance wildly into the clearing almost naked, bedaubed with paint, and allowing their long hair to flow freely as they whirl about. They carry dancing staffs with tufts of feathers at the ends, and with wild bounds approach the high flames. Those Indians dance with a clumsy constraint half crouching, and creeping, in fact the fire is so hot that the performers have to wriggle on the ground in order to get near enough to set alight the feathers at the ends of their dancing sticks. A disc representing the sun is held aloft and around this the wild dancing continues; each time the symbol is lowered and raised a new dance begins. Towards sunrise the sacred ceremonies draw to a close. Men daubed with white come forward and light pieces of bark at the dying embers, then they spring again into a wild chase round the fire, throwing sparks, smoke, and flames all over their bodies. They actually leap among the embers, trusting to the white clay to prevent serious burns."

They dance fire itself; they become fire; their movements are those of flames. What they hold in their hands and set alight appears as though it was they themselves who were burning. Finally they throw

the sparks from the smouldering ashes up into the air, continuing until the rising sun takes over the fire from them, as they had taken it over from the sun at its setting.

The fire here, then, is still a live crowd. Just as other Indians, dancing, become buffaloes, so these act fire. For later peoples this living fire, into which the Najavos transform themselves, becomes a mere crowd symbol.

Behind every recognized crowd symbol one can find the concrete crowd which nourishes it; nor need one depend here on guesswork alone. The human urge to *become* fire, to re-activate this ancient symbol, is still alive in later and more complex cultures. Besieged cities which have abandoned all hope of relief often set fire to themselves. Kings in the last straits of despair burn themselves with their whole court. (Examples of this can be found among the old Mediterranean cultures as well as among the Indians and Chinese.) The Middle Ages, which believed in hell-fire, were satisfied with the burning of a single heretic instead of a whole audience. They, as it were, despatched representatives to hell, and saw to it that they really burnt.

An analysis of the significance which fire has acquired in different religions is of the greatest interest, but it would have little value unless treated at length and must therefore be reserved for another occasion. It seems appropriate, however, to speak here of the significance of impulsive incendiarism in relation to the individual who commits it, an individual who is really isolated and outside the sphere of any religious or political faith.

Kräpelin describes the case of a lonely old woman who, starting as a small child, committed arson about 20 times in her life. Six times she was accused of it, and 24 years of her life were spent in penitentiaries. "If only it would burn" she thinks to herself; arson is a fixed idea, she feels driven to it as though by an invisible power, and particularly when she has matches in her pocket. She certainly likes watching fire, but she also likes confessing, and confessing very circumstantially. She must, early in her life, have experienced fire as a means of attracting people; the commotion around a fire was probably her first experience of a crowd, and it was easy later for fire to take the place of the crowd. Her self-accusation results from her feeling that everyone is watching her. She likes this feeling and, through it, transforms herself into the fire that people are watching. Thus she has a double relationship with arson. Isolated at an early age by her lamentable history, she has had, particularly during her endless prison terms, no opportunity of mingling with crowds and now she wants, first of all, to be part of the

crowd staring at the fire—a fire which is reflected in all eyes and under whose powerful compulsion all eyes turn in the same direction. When the initial blaze is over and the crowd threatens to disperse and escape her, she keeps it alive by suddenly transforming *herself* into the fire. This she achieves very simply: she confesses that she caused it. The fuller and more detailed her story, the longer she will be stared at; the longer she herself will remain the fire.

Cases of this kind are not as rare as one might think. Though not always so extreme, they provide irrefutable proof of the connection between fire and the crowd, even in isolated individuals.

The Sea

The sea is multiple, it moves, and it is dense and cohesive. Its multiplicity lies in its waves; they constitute it. They are innumerable; the sea-farer is completely surrounded by them. The sameness of their movement does not preclude difference of size. They are never entirely still. The wind coming from outside them determines their motion; they beat in this or that direction in accordance with its command. The dense coherence of the waves is something which men in a crowd know well. It entails a yielding to others as though they were oneself, as though there were no strict division between oneself and them. There is no escape from this compliance and thus the consequent impetus and feeling of strength is something engendered by all the units together. The specific nature of this coherence among men is unknown. The sea, while not explaining, expresses it.

Waves are not the only multiple element in the sea. There are also the individual drops of water. It is true that they only become drops in isolation, when they are separated from each other. Their smallness and singleness then makes them seem powerless; they are almost nothing and arouse a feeling of pity in the spectator. Put your hand into water, lift it out and watch the drops slipping singly and impotently down it. The pity you feel for them is as though they were human beings, hopelessly separated. They only begin to count again when they can no longer be counted, when they have again become part of a whole.

The sea has a *voice*, which is very changeable and almost always audible. It is a voice which sounds like a thousand voices, and much has been attributed to it: patience, pain, and anger. But what is most impressive about it is its persistence. The sea never sleeps; by day and by night it makes itself heard, throughout years and decades and centuries. In its impetus and its rage it brings to mind the one entity

which shares these attributes in the same degree; that is, the crowd. But the sea has, in addition, the constancy which the crowd lacks. It is always there; it does not ooze away from time to time and disappear. To remain in existence is the greatest, though as yet fruitless, desire of the crowd; and this desire is seen fulfilled in the sea.

The sea is all-embracing; nor can it ever be filled. If all the streams and rivers and clouds, all the waters of the earth, flowed into it, they would not really increase it; it would remain unchanged; we should still feel that it was the same sea. Thus in its size, too, it serves as a model for the crowd, which always wants to grow and would like to become as large as the sea and, in order to do so, draws in more and more people. The word "ocean" is the final expression of the solemn dignity of the sea. The ocean is universal, it reaches everywhere, it touches all lands; the ancients believed that the earth itself swam on it. If it were possible, once and for always, to fill the ocean, the crowd would have no image of its own insatiability, of its deepest and darkest urge, which is to absorb more and more people. The ocean lies before its eyes as the mythical justification for its own unconquerable urge towards universality.

Thus the sea is changeable in its emotions: it can soothe or threaten or break out in storms. But it is always there. One knows where it is; it lies open and manifest, not appearing suddenly where there was nothing before. It lacks the mystery and suddenness of fire which, like a ravaging animal, springs out at man from nowhere and thus may be expected anywhere; the sea is to be expected only where it is known to be.

But there is, nevertheless, mystery in it, a mystery lying not in suddenness, but in what it contains and covers. The life with which it teems is as much part of it as its enduring openness. Its sublimity is enhanced by the thought of what it contains, the multitudes of plants and animals hidden within it.

The sea has no interior frontiers and is not divided into peoples and territories. It has one language, which is the same everywhere. There is thus no single human being who can be, as it were, excluded from it. It is too comprehensive to correspond exactly to any of the crowds we know, but it is an image of stilled humanity; all life flows into it and it contains all life.

Rain

All over the world, and particularly where it is rare, rain, before it falls, is felt to be a unit. As a cloud it approaches and covers the sky;

the air grows dark before it rains and everything is shrouded in grey-ness. During this moment when it is imminent, rain is more strongly felt as a unit than while it is actually falling, for it is often ardently longed for, and may indeed be literally vital. Even when prayed for, however, it does not always appear; magic is called in aid and there are numerous and varied methods of luring it.

Rain falls in drops. There are many of them, they can be seen, and the direction of their movement is particularly noticeable. All languages speak of rain *falling*. It is seen as parallel streaks, and the number of the falling drops emphasises the uniformity of their direction. There is no movement which makes more impression on man than that of falling; compared with it all others seem secondary and derived. From a very early age falling is what one fears most; it is the first thing in life which one is armed against. Children learn to beware of it and, after a certain age, it becomes ridiculous or dangerous. In contrast to man, rain is what *should* fall, and there is nothing which falls so often or in such multiplicity.

It is possible that the heaviness and hardness of the fall is somewhat diminished by the great number of the falling drops. These can be heard hitting the ground, and it is a pleasant sound; they can be felt on the skin, and it is a pleasant sensation. Three senses at least—sight, hearing and touch—participate in the experience of rain, and to all these senses it is something multiple. It is easy to protect oneself against rain. Only rarely is it a serious menace; usually it is something beneficent and dense which wraps men round.

There is a sameness in the impact of rain-drops, and the parallel lines of their fall and the uniformity, both of their sound and of their wetness on the skin, all serve to accentuate this sameness.

The density of rain is variable. Rain can be heavy or light and the number of the drops is subject to large fluctuations. One can by no means count on its continuous increase; on the contrary, one knows that it will end and its drops ooze away in the earth without trace.

In so far as rain has become a crowd symbol, it does not stand, as fire does, for the phase of raging and irresistible increase. Nor is it ever as constant as the sea, and only rarely as inexhaustible. Rain is the crowd in the moment of discharge, and stands also for its disintegration. The clouds whence it comes dissolve into rain; the drops fall because they can keep together no longer, and it is not clear whether, or when, they can coalesce again.

Rivers

The most striking thing about a river is its direction. It moves between unmoving banks, and these render its flux continuously apparent. The unresting and uninterrupted flow of its waters, the definiteness of its main direction—even if this changes in detail—the determination with which it makes towards the sea, its absorption of other, smaller streams—all this has an undeniably crowd-like character. And thus the river has become a symbol for the crowd, though not so much for the crowd in general as for some of its specific forms. The width of a river is limited; it cannot grow indefinitely or unexpectedly, and hence its use as a crowd symbol is always in some degree provisional only. It stands for processions; the people watching from the pavements are like trees on river-banks, the solid bordering the flowing. Demonstrations in large cities have a similar river-like character: tributaries come from various districts to feed the main stream. Rivers are especially a symbol for the time when the crowd is forming, the time before it has attained what it will attain. Rivers lack the contagiousness of fire and the universality of the sea. But, in place of these, they have an impetus which seems inexhaustible and which, because there is never a time when it is not being fed, is present from the beginning. Hence the fact that their origins are sometimes taken more seriously than their goal.

A river is the crowd in its vanity, the crowd exhibiting itself. This being seen is as important as the element of direction. There is no river without banks; its bordering verdure is like a lane of people. All river-like formations, such as processions and demonstrations, want to be *seen*. They show as much as possible of their surface, extending as far as they can and offering themselves to the largest possible number of spectators. They want to be admired or feared. They have a provisional goal, but it is not really important. The important thing is the stretch which separates them from it, the length of street they have to traverse. The density among their participants need not be very high. It is higher among the spectators, and between spectators and participants a special kind of relationship develops, resembling the love-play of two snake-like creatures, the one slowly and tenderly drawing its length through the embrace of the other.

Growth, of course, is determined at source and takes place only through precisely defined tributaries. In addition to water, a river also carries along with it many other different things and its appearance is much more effectively changed by these than the appearance of the

sea is changed by marine freights, which disappear on the enormous expanse of water.

Summing up, we may conclude that the river is only a limited crowd symbol and differs in this respect from fire, sea, forest or corn. It is the symbol of a movement which is still under control, before the eruption and the discharge; it contains the threat of these rather than their actuality. It is the symbol of the *slow* crowd.

Forest

The forest is *higher* than man. It may be enclosed and overgrown with all kinds of scrub; it may be hard to penetrate, and still harder to traverse, but its real density, that which makes it a forest, is its foliage; and this is overhead. It is the foliage of single trees linked together which forms a continuous roof; it is the foliage which shuts out the light and throws a universal shadow.

Man stands upright like a tree and he inserts himself amongst the other trees. But they are taller than he is and he has to look up at them. No other natural phenomenon of his surroundings is invariably above him and, at the same time, so near and so multiple in its formation as the concourse of trees. For clouds pass, rain dries up, and the stars are distant. Of all the multiple phenomena affecting him from above, none is as perpetually near him as the forest. Tree-tops are attainable; trees can be climbed and their fruit picked and brought down; people have lived in them.

The direction in which a forest draws men's eyes is that of its own growth. A forest grows steadily upwards; the equality of its trees is approximate, consisting, in fact, only in uniformity of direction. Once in the forest, man feels sheltered. He is not at its point of greatest density, the top, where it goes on growing. On the contrary, the density is overhead and protects him. Thus the forest is the first image of awe. It compels men to look upwards, grateful for the protection above. Looking up at trees becomes looking up in general. The forest is a preparation for the feeling of being in church, the standing before God among pillars and columns. Its most harmonious and therefore most perfect expression is the vault of a dome, the trunks of many trees intertwined in a supreme and indivisible unity.

Another, and no less important, aspect of the forest is its multiple immovability. Every single trunk is rooted in the ground and no menace from outside can move it. Its resistance is absolute; it does not give an inch. It can be felled, but not shifted. And thus the forest has become the symbol of the *army*, an army which has taken up a position, which

does not flee in any circumstances, and which allows itself to be cut down to the last man before it gives a foot of ground.

Corn

Corn, in more than one way, is a diminished and subjugated forest. It grows where forest stood before, and it never grows as high. It is man's work and entirely in his power. He sows it and reaps it and, by ancient rites, contributes to its growth. It is as pliant as grass and subject to the influence of every wind. The blades move together in accordance with the wind; the whole field bows down simultaneously. In storms it is struck down completely and remains lying thus for long periods. But it has a mysterious ability to straighten itself and, so long as it has not been too badly maltreated, will suddenly stand there again, the whole field of it. The full ears are like heavy heads; they nod to one or turn away as the wind blows.

Corn is usually shorter than man, but, even when it has grown above his head, he remains its master. It is cut all together, as it grew and was sown together. Even the grasses which man does not use remain together throughout their existence. But how much more striking is the sameness of the fate of blades of corn, sown, harvested, threshed and stored together! As long as corn is growing, it remains rooted on the same spot; no one blade can get away from the other blades, and anything which happens to one happens to all. The blades vary in size, but no more than men; a cornfield as a whole generally appears uniform in height. Its rhythm when excited by the wind is that of a simple dance.

Men readily see their own equality before death in the image of corn. But blades of corn are cut simultaneously and this brings a quite specific death to mind: a common death in battle, whole rows of men mown down together. The cornfield is a battlefield.

The pliancy of corn becomes submissiveness. It is like an assemblage of loyal subjects, incapable of conceiving the idea of resistance. Tremulously obedient they stand there, responsive to every command. When the enemy comes they are mercilessly trampled down.

The heaps of seed from which corn originates are as significant as the heaps of grain it finally becomes. Whether it bears seven or one hundredfold, the latter are many times larger than the former. By growing and standing together it increases; and this increase is its blessing.

Wind

The strength of wind varies, and, with it, its voice. It can whine or howl, and, loud or soft, there are few sounds of which it is not capable. Thus it affects men as something living, long after other natural phenomena have become inanimate. Apart from its voice, the most striking thing about wind is its direction; in order to name it, it is essential to know which quarter it comes from. Since man is entirely surrounded by air, the buffettings he receives from wind are felt as something peculiarly physical. One feels entirely contained in wind, it gathers everything to itself and, in a storm, everything that it seizes is driven along together.

Wind is invisible, but the movement it imparts to clouds and waves, leaves and grasses, makes its multiplicity apparent. In the hymns of the *Vedas* the storm gods or *Maruts*, always appear in the plural. "Their numbers are stated as thrice seven or thrice sixty. . . . They are brothers of equal age, having the same birthplace and the same abode. . . . The noise made by the *Maruts* is thunder and the roaring of winds. They cause the mountains to quake, they shatter trees and, like wild elephants, devour the forests. They are often called singers: the singing of the wind. They are mighty, fierce, terrible like lions, but also playful like children or calves."

The age-old identification of wind and breath is proof of how concentrated wind is felt to be; it has the density of breath. Its invisibility, on the other hand, enables it to stand for invisible crowds, and thus for spirits. They come roaring like a storm, a wild host; or they are spirits in flight, as in the vision of the Eskimo Shaman.

Flags are wind made visible. They are like bits cut from clouds, nearer and more varied in colour, tethered and given permanent shape. In their movement they are truly arresting. Nations use them to mark the air above them as their own, as though the wind could be partitioned.

Sand

Sand has various qualities relevant to this discussion, but two of these are especially important. The first is the smallness and sameness of its parts. This is one quality, not two, for grains of sand are felt to be the same only because they are so small. The second is the endlessness of sand. It is boundless; there is always more of it than the eye can take in. Where it appears in small heaps it is disregarded. It is only really striking when the number of grains is infinite, as on the sea-shore or in the desert.

Sand is continually shifting, and it is because of this that, as a crowd symbol, it stands midway between the fluid and the solid symbols. It forms waves like the sea and rises in clouds; dust is refined sand. Also important is the fact that sand is a threat, confronting man as something hostile and aggressive. The monotony, vastness and lifelessness of the desert, consisting as it does of innumerable, homogeneous particles, opposes to man a power which is almost invincible. Sand suffocates man as the sea does, but more maliciously because more slowly.

Man's relationship to the sand of the desert anticipates the struggle he wages with growing power against huge swarms of tiny enemies. Locusts, like sand, wither vegetation, and man, as cultivator, fears them as he fears sand, for they leave desert behind them.

It is puzzling that sand should ever have become a symbol of progeny. The fact that it has—and the Bible provides many instances of it—proves the intensity of man's desire for immense numbers of descendants. The stress here is not primarily on quality. It is true that people wish for a troop of strong and upright sons, but, for the remoter future, the sum of the life of generations, they want more than this. They want their posterity to be a crowd, and the largest, most boundless and least countable crowd they know is that of sand. How little the individual quality of descendants matters can be seen from the similar symbol of the Chinese, who equate progeny with a swarm of locusts, extolling their numbers and cohesion as a model for man's posterity.

Another symbol which the Bible uses for posterity is the stars. Here, too, the essential is their innumerability. There is no mention of the brightness of single, special stars. What is important is the fact that they remain; that they never pass away, but are always there.

The Heap

Every heap which has human significance has been collected. The unity of a heap of fruit or grain is the result of activity. Many hands were occupied with the picking or harvesting. These are tied to a definite season and are of such decisive importance that the oldest division of the year is derived from them. Men celebrate in feasts their joy over the various heaps they have managed to collect. They exhibit them with pride and often their feasts are arranged round them.

The things which have been collected are all of the same kind, one species of fruit or grain. They are piled as closely as possible and the more there is of them and the denser the pile, the better. It is close at hand and does not have to be fetched from far off. The heap must be

large and people boast of it. Only if it is large enough will it last all of them for any length of time. As soon as they have got used to the gathering of things for these heaps, people go on and on making them larger and larger. They love to remember the years which brought the richest harvest and, as soon as annals are kept, these are recorded in them as the years of greatest happiness. From year to year and place to place harvests vie with each other. Whether they belong to the community or to individuals the heaps of produce stand as exemplars to be guarded and cherished.

It is true that they are then used up, sometimes quickly on special occasions, at other times slowly according to need. The time of their existence is limited. The idea of decrease is contained in them from the beginning and their re-assembly is subject to the rhythm of the seasons. All harvesting is a rhythmic heaping, and feasts are celebrated in accordance with this rhythm.

Stone Heaps

But there are also heaps of an entirely different kind, which are not edible. Such heaps are of stone and are erected precisely because it is difficult to take them to pieces. They are meant to endure for a long time, for a kind of eternity, and should never decrease but remain always as they are. They do not make their way into people's bellies, nor are they always lived in. In their oldest form each separate stone stands for the man who has contributed it to the heap. Later the size and weight of the individual stone increases and each can only be mastered by a number of men working together. Such monuments may represent different things, but each contains the concentrated effort of innumerable difficult journeys. Sometimes it is a mystery how they were erected at all, and the less they can be explained, and the more distant the origin of the stone, the greater the imagined number of their builders and the stronger the impression they make on later generations. They represent the rhythmic exertion of many men, of which nothing remains but these indestructible monuments.

Treasure

Treasure, like all other heaps, is something which has been collected. But, in contrast to fruit and grain, it consists of units which are inedible and imperishable. What is essential is that each of these units should have a special value; it is only confidence in their retaining it which tempts men to amass treasure. A hoard of treasure is a heap which should be left to grow undisturbed. The man it belongs to may be

powerful, but there are always others equally powerful to rob him. The prestige treasure gives its owner carries danger with it; fights and wars have arisen over treasure and many a man would have lived longer if his treasure had been smaller. Thus it is often of necessity kept secret. The peculiarity of treasure lies in the tension between the splendour it should radiate and the secrecy which is its protection. The lust of counting, of seeing numbers mount up, derives largely from treasure and is most comprehensible there. None of the other enumerations whose desired result is the highest possible figure—those of cattle, or of men, for example—share the same concentration of countable units. The image of the owner secretly counting his treasure is deeply engraved in the minds of men; and no less imperishable is their hope of discovering treasure for themselves, treasure which has been so well hidden that it lies forgotten in its hiding-place and no longer belongs to anyone. Disciplined armies have been corroded and overcome by their greed for treasure, and many victories turned to defeat. The transformation, even before battle, of an army into a band of treasure-seekers is described by Plutarch in his life of Pompey.

“As soon as Pompey landed his fleet near Carthage, 7,000 of the enemy deserted and came over to him. His own army consisted of six legions at full strength. Here, they say, a rather absurd thing happened to him. It seems that some of his soldiers came across some hidden treasure and got a considerable amount of money. The story of this got abroad and all the rest of the army fancied that the place must be full of money which had been buried by the Carthaginians at some time of calamity. And so, for many days, Pompey could do nothing at all with his soldiers who were all busy looking for treasure. He merely went about laughing at the sight of so many thousands of men together digging up the ground and turning it over, until in the end they got tired of it and asked him to lead them wherever he liked; they had already, they said, suffered enough for their foolishness.”

But apart from the heaps or hoards which are irresistible because they are hidden, there are others which are collected quite openly, as a kind of voluntary tax, and in the understanding that they will fall into the hands of one person, or of a few. To this group belong all kinds of lottery; they are quick accumulations of treasure. It is known that, immediately after the announcement of the result, they will be handed over to the fortunate winners. The smaller the number of these, the larger the treasure and the greater, therefore, its attraction.

The greed which unites people on such occasions presupposes an absolute confidence in the units composing the treasure. It is difficult to

exaggerate the strength of this confidence. A man identifies himself with the unit of his money; doubt cast on it offends him and, if it is shattered, his self-confidence is shaken. He feels slighted and humiliated by the lowering of the value of his monetary unit and, if this process is accelerated and inflation occurs, it is *men* who are depreciated until they find themselves in formations which can only be equated with flight-crowds. The more people lose, the more united are they in their fate. What appears as panic in the few who are fortunate enough to be able to save something for themselves, turns into mass-flight for all those others who have become equals by being deprived of their money. I shall describe in a later chapter the consequences of this phenomenon which, particularly in our own time, have been of incalculable general importance.

Canetti is one of our great imaginers
and solitary men of genius.

—IRIS MURDOCH

Crowds and Power is a revolutionary work in which Elias Canetti finds a new way of looking at human history and psychology. Breathtaking in its range and erudition, it explores Shiite festivals and the English Civil War, the finger exercises of monkeys and the effects of inflation in Weimar Germany. In this study of the interplay of crowds, Canetti offers one of the most profound and startling portraits of the human condition.

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ELIAS CANETTI (1905–94) was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1981. His writings include a novel, *Auto-da-Fé*, and three volumes of memoirs, *The Tongue Set Free*, *The Torch in My Ear*, and *The Play of the Eyes*.

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