FAR FROM THE CROWD: 
Individuation, Solitude, and “Society” in the Western Imagination

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In the “prologue on the theater” in Goethe’s Faust I, the figure of the poet remarks:

O sprich mir nicht von jener bunten Menge, 
Bei deren Anblick uns der Geist entflieht. 
Verhülle mir das wogende Gedränge, 
Das wider Willen uns zum Strudel zieht. 

(59–62)

[Don’t speak to me of crowds at whose mere sight 
The spirit flees us! That you could confine 
The surging rabble that draws us with might 
To compromise our every great design.]

The passage is representative for an entire conception and epoch of modern literature: the poet in his ivory tower, aloof from, disdainful of, yet tempted by, the crowd. Moreover, it also addresses the paradoxical relation between poetry and theater (“Die Masse könnt ihr nurch durch Masse zwingen / Ein jeder sucht sich
endlich selbst was aus“ [95–6]). (The mass is overwhelmed only by masses / Each likes some part of what has been presented). We might apply to these lines, and, by extension, to the character Faust, an observation by Georg Lukács, who has argued that the tragic hero is by definition a lonely figure who strives to elevate himself above the merely human and the masses: “Die Einsamkeit ist aber etwas Paradox-Dramatisches: sie ist die eigentliche Essenz des Tragischen” (Faust, 36).

(Solitude is something paradoxical-dramatic: it is the true essence of the tragic).ii

The present essay is concerned with the evolution of such anticrowd sentiments, the public, literary performance of solitude, as well as the perception and representation of crowds from an “individualist” perspective. In fact, what is absent from most sociological accounts of the masses, as well as from Elias Canetti’s anthropological approach in Crowds and Power, is an analysis of the relation between individuated observers and formations of the crowd. I will try to show that there is a long tradition of Western literature, both modern and early modern, which expresses this relationship between the individual and the crowd. In contrast to sociological investigation and philosophical reflection, literary works do not show the masses (and, in a wider sense, the “public,” “society”) from an objective, “scientific” perspective, but give us representative, historically conditioned accounts of the interaction between individuals and their social surroundings—in relation to which they see themselves as apart, or as distant observers. However, I will occasionally also draw on the work of philosophical writers. The writings of Nietzsche in particular are pertinent both for its formal links with early modern writers and its strong influence on turn-of-the-century writers.

More specifically, the following account, necessarily highly selective, will privilege texts by writers who reflect upon their own literary authorship as conditioned by, and as symptomatic of, the interaction between the individual and the collective. This is to say that the literary author becomes necessarily a “solitary” individual who shares his thoughts with a mostly anonymous public. In this sense, we are concerned not only with the historical evolution of subject/crowd formations (obviously an integral part of every subjective formation), but also with a central aspect of the mechanism of literary communication. ■

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ii  Georg Lukács, Die Theorie des Romans. Ein geschichtsphilosophischer Versuch über die Form der großen Epik (Frankfurt am Main: Luchterhand, 1977).
events such as the circus were looked down upon by the intellectual elite who felt that there were more worthy ways of relaxing and entertaining oneself, and felt that gathering people together in large numbers encouraged the spread of vice because it provided many examples of bad behavior. Seneca (who lived under two of Rome’s most notorious Emperors, Caligula and Nero, both of whom used games to distract the public) complains about the terrible effect that attending the games has on his moral character. “... I come home more greedy, more ambitious, more voluptuous, and even more cruel and inhuman - because I have been among human beings.” [2] In the case of gladiatorial shows, the “vulgus” had the power of life or death over the competitors, condemning them with a turn of the thumb. Seneca argues that this teaches cruelty to those with compassionate sensibilities as they cannot help but be swayed if the majority desires death.

“Vulgus” also had an active meaning, describing the spread of information to the public as well as referring to the public itself. The adverb derived from it, “vulgo,” meant ‘publicly’, and the verb “vulgare” meant ‘to make widely known’ or ‘to make common to all.’ These notions of popular availability led to the words being used to refer to promiscuity and prostitution.

Rome was a densely populated city, comprising a million inhabitants at its zenith and unsurpassed in size until London during the Industrial Revolution. The city contained a large number of people - slaves, unemployed and homeless, menial laborers and craftsmen - who existed on a level far below that of the literary Romans whose writings survive to us today. They used the word “vulgus” to refer to this shadowy mass of people who filled the buildings and streets and kept Rome noisy and bustling, but were largely unknown to the upper classes. The elite understood the potential power of this under-class due to its huge size, but thought it mentally and morally inferior and easily manipulated. The “vulgus” was seen as easily susceptible to persuasion by rhetorical skill or even by the rumors that spread quickly through the packed city. Thus Cicero says “Sic est vulgus; ex veritate paucia, ex opinone multa aestimat.” (This is the way of the crowd; its judgments are seldom founded on truth, mostly on opinion.) [3]

The Roman attitude of condescension towards the “vulgus” has survived to us in our use of the word “vulgar” to describe uneducated or ignorant people, or something common or otherwise beneath us.

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**TESTIMONY**

The March On Washington

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In August of 1963 several hundred thousand people converged on the Mall in Washington, at the behest of A. Phillip Randolph and Martin Luther King, in a rally “for jobs and freedom.” Friends in Princeton (where I was then living) who were involved in the civil rights movement suggested to me that I might wish to go down to attend the rally on a bus that their group had chartered. My parents had once worked for Randolph, so I was familiar with his strategy of using real or threatened “Marches on Washington” to win concessions from the federal government. I liked the idea of taking part of such a march. I was part of a contingent, perhaps half black and half white, who sang songs (usually “We shall overcome”) during our three-hour bus trip from Princeton.

When we arrived in Washington, it was apparent that what was taking place was a rather loose gathering. At the end of the Mall nearest the Lincoln Memorial, where the speakers were, stood a mass of people, too thick to penetrate. Loudspeakers attempted to get the voices of the speakers to the rest of the gathering, which gradually thinned out the nearer it got to the Washington Monument end of the Reflecting Pool. But the loudspeakers were not powerful enough to do the job. I caught occasional lines of what Dr. King was saying (it was his “I have a dream” speech), but they were too intermittent to hold my interest, so I just wandered around. Eventually I happened upon an old girlfriend, with whom I spent the rest of the afternoon, catching up on what we had been doing in recent years. We both had given up on trying to figure out what the speakers were saying, and figured that we were doing a duty just by being present in the general vicinity, identifiably part of the rally. When evening came, I went back to the bus, and dozed my way home.

That 1963 event was, as it turned out, historically important. But at the time there was no particular crowd spirit in evidence, at least none that I can remember. Everybody was glad to be there, since we all liked the sense of having contributed to the sheer number of those who had answered Randolph’s and King’s call. But we were not caught up in a common enthusiasm. Perhaps some segments of the crowd were, but not the part that I was in.
NOTES

SOURCES

Entry by Alexandra Katherina T. Sofroniew