

Gabriel Tarde (1843-1894) was a criminologist and social psychologist, an early proponent of the idea that crowds sometimes manifest a kind of “group mind” because of an innate human tendency of imitative behavior. His Fragment d’histoire future (1896; tr. as Underground Man) was a more elaborate exercise of the same kind as the present story, but less farcical in its satire. “The Bald Giants” was originally published in La Revue Bleue, novembre 1892)

Gabriel Tarde: *The Bald Giants*

It was in the year of grace 1992. One can trace back to that precise date the initial seed of the most marvelous revolution that has regenerated our species. On a fine day at the end of April, an illustrious philanthropic agronomist, animal-breeder and reformer named Samuel Zède was walking in a seigneurial park in the south of France.

France was then employing the unexpected leisure of a long peace fruitfully, compensating itself with luxury for a few petty civil wars; divided into a dozen universal republics, it had returned, in the name of communal liberty, to feudal vexations. But the French, ever intelligent, were rejoicing in being avenged by the great Czar Nicolas V or VI, who, after having taken Berlin by assault and vassalized the Empire of Germany, had extended his domination all the way to the banks of the Rhine.

More careful of our true interests, Samuel was meditating while walking on that Muscovite deluge. He was paying scant attention to the songs of the birds, the purity of the air and the sky, and the limpidity of a beautiful river that was passing the foot of the château, carrying large ships in its course escorted by a file of small boats—for the gradual destruction of the railways, the result of territorial fragmentation, had rendered river navigation its former prosperity.

Our doctor was not very poetic, although a dreamer to the highest degree, and even rather chimerical. That day, however, he seemed more struck than usual by the beauty of nature. He had just taken his habitual turn around his poultry-yard, his barn and his bed of rare flowers. He had cast a gaze of paternal admiration at his beautiful cattle, so fat that they were stifling, at his racehorses, as thin and spare as the horse of the Apocalypse, at his magnificent pigs, so buried in their paunches that only their little spiral tails served to make them recognizable. He had also darted a glance at the aviary, where the most beautiful hybrids in the world were putting on flesh, and on his kennel, where running dogs with ears so long that they made a noise like Spanish castanets while shaking off their fleas were howling from time to time. Finally, his tulips, his double roses and his extravagant dahlias, all sparkling with the foam of sap and life poured out in iridescent cascades by his flower-beds, had obtained a smile of satisfaction from him.

But having seen that, he became thoughtful again and wandered into the forest. When he arrived in a clearing he stopped next to an eglantine. Before him opened one of the pretty flowers, so simple, of the thorny bush; a pure corolla with five petals, scarcely pink and, in the language of the poet “as pale as a cheek of which amour has drunk the colors,” timidly offered him its light cup, as the sky often presents to the most unfortunate along the path of life. For the first time, the learned dreamer appeared to remark that uncomplicated beauty; comparing it to his double roses, he reflected profoundly, and from one idea to another, from one comparison to another, I shall tell you the route that his thought followed.

“Such, then,” he said to himself, “is the original theme of all the variations of horticulture; this rose, so pale and virginal, is the mother of all our opulent and provocative roses. When I compare it with those roses that I was observing just now, however, what a contrast! All trace of parentage has disappeared. There is a world, an infinity, between them. And now, if I draw another parallel, if I compare myself, a literate scientist, to that ignorant rustic peasant with whom I was chatting before coming here, let us be frank, is the interval between him and me equal to that between the two flowers, one of which is cultivated and the other is not? Immensely less, surely. The stamens of the simple flower have been

transformed into petals in the double flower, but that is a prodigy; it is as if the arms of the peasant were transformed into a pair of cherub's wings attached to my flanks!

“Now, there is no doubt about it, I cannot fly, and I have reason to think that, save for a few differences to his advantage, that natural man is conformed like me, a son of culture. If he is doubtless more envious than me, and I am perhaps a little more egotistical than him, in spite of my philanthropy, that comes from what I possess and what he would like to possess; and that is of no consequence. He believes in witches and I have believed in turning tables. His agriculture is a little more backward than mine, but in compensation, it is much less ruinous. In sum, the two of us are very nearly equivalent. The power of education thus has a much more restricted effect on us than on other beings, and the transformations that humans can operate on themselves are nothing compare with those they operate around them.

“But let us go further. That wild duck I can see over there differs strangely from the ducks in our poultry-yards, its relatives. It differs more than I differ from the peasant in question. On the other hand, it differs less than the eglantine I have before my eyes differs from the double rose in my flower bed. In pursuing these juxtapositions I believe that one can easily arrive a formulating a law: the more distant a living being is from humans—the duck is doubtless less distant than the rose—the more radically humans can transform it; from which it follows that, of all living beings, human are the most difficult to transform.

“Nevertheless, it need not be thus. And that law is only a warning addressed to our revolutionaries. Who could help laughing, in fact, on confronting their pretensions and their bombast with their results? Would one not think that they had already endowed us with Considerant's additional eye because they have substituted their personalities for other nullities on the governmental seats?¹ There is no advocate's secretary, restored by a revolutionary stroke of his employer, who does not believe in good faith that his homeland has been regenerated, in sensing himself slightly remade. With all that, we still walk on our two legs, with gout, and all our successive regenerations, which are represented to us as transfusions of blood, have never been, in essence, anything but effusions, alas.

“The truer revolutionaries are those who have invented the trowel, the mill, the printing press, the telescope and the locomotive; they have introduced into our existence and our condition, if not into our nature, a few rather notable and considerably exaggerated changes. And again, what is that—iron knives instead of flint scrapers, locomotives instead of diligences—when I think of the stamens of my eglantine becoming petals in a double flower? If one calls those industrial modifications progress, the passage from one world to another, the gradual divinization of humankind, how can one qualify the vegetal revolution in question?

I consent that people swoon before the cabalistic figure of 1789 and think of everything that preceded it as antediluvian, but tell me what is paleontological in the skulls of my ancestors, and how the transformism of our scientists applies to that somewhat overrated revolution? Revolution is a pretentious word applied to changes in the shirt of the human species. They are like more-or-less useful baths, sometimes baths of Pelias,² but more often Turkish baths accompanied by vigorous massages; apart from scratches, the skin does not change, or hardly changes, at all.

On the day when humans were derived from apes, if one admits the thing, there was truly a revolution worthy of the name; but since then there have only been pastiches. When one thinks of the timidity of our radicals, one is amazed. Moses teaches the Hebrews circumcision, Mohammed teaches the Arabs ablutions, Lycurgus teaches the Spartans to eat gruel—and they are the most radical reforms. The principal human evolutions have certainly been operated in costumes, and from the thigh-guard to trousers there is undoubtedly a much greater distance than from Barbarossa to Emperor Wilhelm, may

¹ Victor Prosper Considerant (1808-1893) was a utopian socialist and ardent follower of Charles Fourier, whose own writings echoed many of Fourier's extravagant futuristic speculations.

² In Greek myth, King Pelias, who sent Jason to search for the Golden Fleece, was invited by his daughters to step into a cauldron, which they had been tricked by Medea into believing capable of rejuvenating him; instead, he was boiled alive.

God have his soul. One wonders why shirt-makers, hatters and tailors have never been called to play a political role.

“It is evident that, in spite of all those abortive attempts, human nature is a raw material that no one has yet been able to manufacture. We have made the tour of it; it has been attacked indirectly by education—the boldest and the greatest have proceeded in that fashion—or simply by a modification of the political, alimentary or intellectual regime, but who has taken the bull resolutely by the horns? Who has treated human stupidity, human imbecility, our incurable wound, as one treats a fever with quinine—which is to say, directly and by means of its specific? No one, I repeat, no one...

“With the result that the brain—that flower of our souls, that delicate corolla, of which our skull is the thick calyx and our vertebral column the gross stem—still awaits its horticulture! Lycurgus purified the race, but in a roundabout manner, by means of an artificial Darwinian selection of the most handsome children. Gall—a precursor, that one!—has envisaged the problem but he has not solved it;³ he has divided up the brain into plots like a kitchen garden, but apart from the fact that there is much to retouch in his mosaic, is he preoccupied with the essential point, knowing how to cultivate each of those plots, with the means of developing artificially the bumps that he has discovered? Do you think so? He would not have dared, even if he had been able to do it! And there have been poets scandalized by the boldness of the *audax japeti genus*!⁴ What! All scholars have found it very simple for a long time to admit that the skull is the result of the suture of a few vertebrae, but we despair of being able to inflate certain parts of that organ slightly? When will we occupy ourselves with searching for the key to that strong-box of our thoughts and our souls?

“A prodigious thing! A miserable insect, a cynips,⁵ which has not made the anatomy of an oak-leaf or the stem of an eglantine—I see a justice in this—has only to bite that leaf or that stem and secrete a little liquid thereinto, and in a few days it swells, swells visibly, become enormous, I nearly said hydroptic. And we, who have dissected the brain, who can even fabricate mechanical brains, have not yet distilled in our laboratories the precious liquid that, poured into one of the bumps of the skull, would lend it a sudden tumefaction, accompanied by an extraordinary development of the corresponding mental faculty

“I am mistaken; we have found something approaching it: coffee; but its effect is nether localized nor durable. Is it not good that it gives us a legitimate hope of finding something better?

“Well, if it is thus, what do my barns and my poultry-yards matter, my kennels and my hothouse; ought I not to blush at knowing how to swell the shoulders of my cattle and the bellies of my boars, and lengthen the ears of my dogs, if I am impotent to develop by half a centimeter the least of the cranial protuberances of one of my children?

“Will I be told that the long centuries that have gone by without any cerebral transformation are an obstacle to a sudden regeneration of the human brain? But that is nothing. Analogy responds to the contrary. For millions of years, the primrose of China remained simple until the day when, in the last century, a gardener had the whim to double it and vary it, and in a few years it was no longer recognizable. There is many a family of farmers who, since the Roman Empire, transmitted its ignorance and inveterate rusticity from father to son; put the child in college today, educate him appropriately, and he will metamorphose into a petty clerk without the slightest difficulty, into a scribe or a clubman, and handle words or a pen as well as his father handled the plow.

“Oh, if I could! O Gall, Lavater, Fourier and all, might I merit being your pupil! And you, little flower, can you have suggested to me the great idea, without comparison, of this century and all centuries!”

³ Franz Josef Gall (1758-1828), the popularizer of the pseudoscience of phrenology, which expanded the physiognomic studies of Johann Lavater (1741-1801).

⁴ Literally, “the audacious children of Japhet,” but the phrase was used by Jean de La Fontaine as a poetic description of the human race and caught on as a conventional way of referring to an anonymous crowd.

⁵ *Cynips quercusfolii*, the gall wasp.

From the day when he made the preceding reflections on the social problem, Doctor Samuel neglected agronomy entirely. Buried in absolute retreat, in the midst of a collection of skulls of every sort—which he enriched incessantly, like Bernard Palissy⁶ in the midst of his enamels—he delivered himself day and night to experiments on living animals, including dogs, cats and monkeys. An obsession hallucinated him. He departed from the ancient observation that the skull of newborns is soft, flexible and easily malleable, so he experimented on mammals, the heads of which he reshaped.

In addition, he had composed certain drugs, as tonic as coffee but much more specialized in their effects, the action of which he combined with that of metallic molds, which served his experimental subjects as coiffures. I shall not go into the details of his procedures, which have, in any case, been lost, like the secret of Greek fire.

What is certain is that hazard served him marvelously and that he obtained from the outset, extraordinary results. A monkey molded and drugged by him became intelligent enough to take the place of his valet de chambre, even combining with his qualities a penchant for the drunkenness of which he died. Two of his dogs learned to read, and a third, having escaped, was taken for the devil in person by the local inhabitants, who fled the château like an inferno.

Encouraged by the success of his first operations, the great philanthropist resolved to consummate his work. He was heard pronouncing strange words. His ill humor against pseudo-revolutionaries increased by the day. “Our forefathers were irrational,” he often said. “Their politics consisted of cutting off the heads that inconvenienced them. That was cutting down the tree to reach the fruit of concord. The politics of the future will consist of making heads, of grafting heads. The best means to reach an understanding is to manipulate brains; it will suffice to pinch the interior mechanism, and the sovereign will think whatever you wish. That is what can be called a new era.”

In fact, in that era the doctor became a father, and the father of a sturdy son who looked at him so stupidly, wept so foolishly and suckled so awkwardly during the first hour of his existence that he was judged idiotic unanimously by the entire chorus of midwives and nurses. Samuel seemed delighted with those marks of stupidity, which would put all the more in relief the efficacy of his discoveries. Immediately, notwithstanding the opposition of his wife, who fortunately died of the consequences of childbirth, he set forth on the work of mental transfiguration. His first concern was to enclose the nursling’s head in a hemispherical steel mold of military appearance. A new-born thus coiffed in a helmet, in which he slept, suckled, etc., giving him a rather amusing military appearance, had not been seen before. It seemed at first to be a mockery addressed to certain braided and deep-rooted kepis of the local national guard, so no one suspected what that martial coiffure was nurturing.

Isaac—that was Samuel’s son—owed to that initial education being bald all his life, bald-born, in a sense. He also retained a few stomach upsets. On the other hand, he grew on his forehead two mound-like eminences, which swelled with age, gradually tattooing it with interlaced furrows and hieroglyphics.

At the age of two, his father judged that the helmet could be removed. “I am,” he said “only the spur of nature; now that she is on the right path, let us allow her to do her work.” He was not to repent of it.

I shall not recount the successive prodigies achieved by young Isaac to begin with; it was not his least merit to rectify the opinion of his nurse regarding his faculties, and later to stupefy his teachers and comrades. Suffice it to say that, endowed with two admirable bumps, that of calculation and that of play, he became the greatest calculator and the greatest gambler—which is to say, the greatest capitalist—the word has ever seen. At ten years of age he laid siege to his college and obliged his headmaster to capitulate. At eighteen he commanded a corps of sharpshooters and found the means, with his volunteers, to accomplish exploits—notably reconquering Algeria and Senegal, lost more than fifty years before after an Arab and negro revolt—to the benefit of our civilization.

At twenty, the twelve or fifteen universal republics of France having succeeded in agreeing (once is not custom) to declare simultaneous war on England, which then threatened us, he was nominated by acclamation generalissimo of our armies on land and sea. One cannot imagine the ideas he had in that

⁶ The sixteenth-century Huguenot engineer and craftsman Bernard Palissy, who spent many years attempting to imitate Chinese porcelain.

immortal campaign. He put Caesar and Napoléon definitively into oubliettes. He took up the Napoleonic project of an invasion of England, but with what engines!—not with a fleet of nutshells but with an immense squadron of improved submarine torpedo-boats. Every torpedo contained a battalion and a month's food-supplies; it was equipped with a rubber tube, the extremity of which floated invisibly on the surface of the sea, where it drew the air necessary for respiration. The torpedo-flagship was linked to all the others by an ingenious system of telephones.

Imagine the stupor of the English when, that terrible army having traversed the Channel and sailed up the Thames, they saw rising from the water in the port of London myriads of little crystal edifices, which reminded them of their ancient exhibitions. At the same moment, in fact, at a signal from the admiral, all the soldiers had given the river bed a vigorous kick and had returned to the surface. Clinging to the flanks of the vessels that filled the port, climbing up and capturing the entire fleet, was the affair of a moment. Before the end of the day, the capital of the British Isles was in our hands, and England capitulated. There was not a lady in the realm who did not moan henceforth about the decadence of English mores and the forgetfulness of good manners, the unique cause of the great reverse.

In the meantime, the Czar, aided by his vassal the Emperor of Germany, took advantage of our invasion of England to invade us: a grave imprudence, which permitted General Isaac to give his full measure. Within two months, by virtue of the cares of that artificial Moltke, incomparably superior to the other, neither Prussia, nor Germany, nor Russia existed any longer. He had invented a species of telegraphic artillery, the details of which escapes me, by means of which, tranquilly sitting in an office armchair in the telegraph office in Paris, he was able to bombard Berlin and Saint Petersburg at the same time. Informed by molded swallows, which served as scouts, of all the movements of the enemy, and endowed in addition with a prodigious strategic skill, he captured two million prisoners and such a great quantity of cannons that a pyramid of steel was built subsequently on the bank of the Seine.

TO BE CONTINUED IN THE BOOK