

DEVALUED CURRENCY

Elegiac Symposium on Paradigm Shifts
Part 3

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INTRODUCTION: FROM SCRATCH

“I resist the notion”—Stanley Hauerwas, the theologian, has said in an interview—“that conversion is a sudden change at a particular point in one’s life.” He went on to remark that Saint Teresa of Avila “never had any sudden conversion. She was just born knowing God and knowing that God knew her.” What is striking about this statement is not that it presents a new view of conversion but that the view presented is so rare nowadays. Times are running against what William James called “actions without external picturesqueness.” By this wonderful phrase, James meant acts so inconspicuous that they are not good candidates for the sort of narratives we tend to tell about our lives. We place special emphasis on the unconditioned possibility of new beginnings—on, as we say, starting from scratch. It does not matter much whether the new start is a born-again conversion, commitment to a smoke-free life, a revolution against tyranny, or a shift in scientific paradigm.

It is as if American bankruptcy law (an admirable law *per se*) had been extended to all such cases. One declares a new start and life proceeds unen-

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cumbered, sheltered from debts contracted in a previous existence. Should former creditors (or a skeleton from some closet) protest, one responds: “You are referring to someone else.” Locations—premises—can remain the same (the process is not incompatible with a physicalist understanding of identity). Still, in the site where once stood a dry-cleaning business now stands a grocery store. Individual persons do it; Kuhn tells us that sciences do it; whole societies have been known to do it. The medieval juridical dictum *universitas non moritur* (“a corporation does not die”) is these days of uncertain application: even juridical persons can now reinvent themselves and, thus, die. “Call me Croatia” and “Call me Daimler-Chrysler” are at one with “Call me Ms. Walker” or “I’m no longer Edgar, I’m Edna”—and all betray a common understanding of freedom and personal identity.

The past appears, in this context, to be an impediment to adequate redemption, an undesired interlocutor, or a presence hard to bear. The *Oxford English Dictionary* suggests that the phrase “from scratch” is not very old: the first attested occurrence is in an 1876 article in the *Bicycle Journal*, where it is stated that “Mr. Tom Sabin, of the Coventry Bicycle Club, has won, during last week, three races from scratch.” Sixty years later, the *OED* tells us, *The Economist* was still putting the phrase in inverted commas, apropos no less of Nazi Germany, said to have started “her rapid rearmament ‘from scratch’ in 1933.” The emphasis on absolute beginnings is, in matters of vocabulary, relatively recent. “From scratch,” moreover, as employed now with regard to cakes and states, is used in an implicitly commendatory tone. Empirical differences notwithstanding, there is a fine line, if one at all, between the shame of using cake mixes and the deplorability of following precedents in statecraft. In each case, emphasis falls on independence from extant rules, procedures, and shortcuts. The important thing is to be singular.

From singularity to the picturesque is a small step. When, in a note to his translation of the *Iliad*, Pope refers to a “marshy Spot of Ground, . . . the Tamarisk, . . . the Reeds that are heap’d together to mark the Place” as “Circumstances the most *Picturesque* imaginable,” what he means is *unforgettable* because *unrepeatable*. And the singularity is accompanied by solitude. The solitude of the observer plays a leading role in the best-known examples of picturesqueness in the eighteenth century. Relevant as well is that all varieties of hero worship since around that time have emphasized personal calling, though it was not until sometime in the twentieth century that the voice a hero hears has emanated from the present rather than the past. As late as 1923, Rilke’s Archaic Torso could still say things like “*Du muss dein Leben andern*” yet be “screwed back from the dead.” By our own time, however, it is the present—the latest nicotine-addiction studies, apocalyptic prognoses from environmental statistics—that calls the hero to endure or bring radical change. The commanding present, moreover, seems by this time to be internal. It is something like Pinocchio’s portable cricket that tells us to shift

paradigms. And it rarely occurs to us that the decisive and picturesque changes we make are only recent installments in a history apart from which no change, however revolutionary, has its own independent significance. Questioning these and other basic assumptions that we hold would only reinforce a sense of our own interesting, picturesque importance—a sense that goes strangely against the humility required of anyone prepared to quit smoking, speak suddenly in tongues, or shift a paradigm.

It has been remarked that Western literature, whether artistic or historical or theoretical, reiterates endlessly the kind of picturesque circumstance that Pope celebrated in his *Homer*. The lawn furniture may shift here and there, but what is perceived as special in the landscape will attract repetition, and repetition is anything but special. Wondrous landscapes, miracles, and prodigious lives have an affinity for the plural number that defies comprehension. Analogously, descriptions of rebirths, revolutionary turns, and instances of self-making tend to read as the confessions of converts to established faiths, professing ends and fresh starts but evidencing only repetition. Elizabeth Anscombe has deplored “the (deeply rooted) grammatical illusion of a subject,” but it is not self-examination per se that is the problem. Self-awareness, self-differentiation, self-centeredness are all characteristic of the kind of animal that we are. It is more that self-differentiation has become so much a trademark of the species. From the fact of our difference from other species we have inferred that our actions are unique, our circumstances perennially new; and our self-descriptions are therefore picturesque (as opposed, for example, to monotonous or quaint).

It may prove, in the end, that the proliferation of converts—men and women of the latest of so many paradigm shifts—amounts to a generalization of fanaticism. The dark side of self-reliance is self-teaching. Its consequence is the tyranny of one’s own impressions and opinions, itself a stimulant to ever more inept beginnings. There is a perhaps technical dimension to this fanaticism, insofar as it coincides with refusal to be subject to someone else’s opinion as a condition of being able to learn anything. The word *method*, deriving from the Greek *methodos*, originally was used to mean innocent and trivial pursuits of life, such as following in someone else’s steps. In the word’s Latinized form, it was used to denote *every* special procedure, and such was the use made standard by Descartes. In his case, though, if I am not mistaken, the stress did not fall on “procedure.” Rather, he emphasized the special circumstances that surrounded his wondrous rediscovery of the soul, or perhaps the discovery that he *had* a soul, complete with a stove in proper working condition and a body in repose. In short, by *method* Descartes meant a form of self-teaching that has reigned almost unchallenged ever since—one that, essentially, couples *do-it-yourself* with *gnosis*.

At the beginning of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle famously implies that the study and indeed practice of virtue are characteristic of old age. The young, in

Aristotle's view, as in Plato's, should devote themselves to swimming and geometry, since "to such persons, as to the incontinent, knowledge brings no profit." An argument could be made, however, that there is a direct proportionality between the prestige of picturesque actions and the demise of senectude (or even of senility). The particular illusion according to which I am a privileged screen on which the premieres of revelations are projected to no end renders disturbing (and thus dispensable) the possibility that my revelations are recurrences of a species-specific event. A gastric contraction, like a paradigm shift, feels ever new, intense, revelatory, and unique. The perhaps apocryphal figure of young Pascal rehearsing, as if for the first time, the Euclidean proofs of Euclidean theorems offers a warning or at least an irony worth observing. The feeling of doing something for the first time is the oldest feeling in the world and is owed not so much to the fact that one knows something but to the fact that one does not know many things. Pascal came to this realization himself, though a bit late in life, and one wishes a sobriety of his kind on the rest of us. For the opposite of sobriety, wisdom, and maturity is the presumption of one's singularity, the uniqueness of one's time, the picturesqueness of one's actions, and the capacity of human beings, whether corporately or individually, to begin everything or indeed anything again from scratch.

— *Miguel Tamen*