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# The Phoenix Complex

## A Philosophy of Nature

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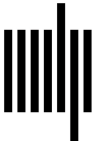
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# 1 THE PHOENIX COMPLEX

The phoenix complex: we are all suffering from it, individually and collectively. It is in us, having become entrenched in minds and bodies over millennia, all the while we are trapped in it, our practices and infrastructures servicing its many units and component parts. Even more so, the fate of the livable world well beyond the human sphere is hanging in the balance on account of this cross-cultural and transhistorical, in equal measure psychological and political, religious and philosophical, complex. If it remains undiagnosed, it is because the phoenix complex comprises a *mélange* of practices, narratives, discourses, beliefs, and hopes that has not yet been formally called by its proper name. And, assuming that scholars duly recognize and classify it, this predicament will likely not be acknowledged as a problem at all, but as a blessing in the form of the infinitely self-regenerative capacity inherent in finite existence.

In the concluding pages of *Pyropolitics in the World Ablaze*, I brought up the phoenix complex with reference to “the politics of ashes.” I described it as follows: “In the twenty-first century, the myth of the phoenix continues to bewitch us. We still think of ashes as fertilizers, nourishing new growth. After destructive flames have done their work, the sun’s creative blaze will give a sign of resurrection to the plants it will call forth from the residues of past burning. Between the two fires, life and hope will resume. Vegetation will spring from the earth and strive skywards afresh.”<sup>1</sup>

The invocation of the phoenix complex in *Pyropolitics* was a playful riff on Gaston Bachelard’s elaboration of the Prometheus complex and the

Empedocles complex in *The Psychoanalysis of Fire*.<sup>2</sup> Bachelard sees the complexes he identifies as two sides of the same flaming coin. (Gold, by the way, has a privileged relation to the cosmic flame, to which Heraclitus analogizes it in Fragment 90.<sup>3</sup>) The active Prometheus complex is an expression of “the will to intellectuality,” replete with “all those tendencies which impel us *to know* as much as our fathers, more than our fathers, as much as our teachers, more than our teachers.”<sup>4</sup> The Empedocles complex is its passive counterpart, the condition, in which the “fascinated individual hears *the call of the funeral pyre*.”<sup>5</sup> The phoenix complex is, conversely, on the hither side of knowing and fascination, while embracing both of these poles. Instead of choosing between the imperative “to seize fire” (Prometheus) or “to give oneself to fire” (Empedocles), the phoenix seizes fire by giving herself to it, surrendering her past self in order to gain a foothold, or a winghold, in the future.

Why does the self-sacrificial logic of the phoenix triumph, even and especially in an age that prides itself on its secularity? This question will shadow every hypothesis and every conclusion to come. One possibility is that humanity has not yet learned how to deal with and, above all, how to think otherwise about the finite transcendence of finitude that yields an image of infinity. Fecundity, regeneration, procreation, the beginning of life after an end of other lives: every facet of vitality, with its ruptured continuities tracing the outlines of survival, is sieved through the mesh of sacrifice and self-sacrifice. A religious framework exchanges finite existence for life everlasting; hence the leap of the pre-Socratic philosopher, Empedocles, into the active crater of Mount Etna in an attempt to become godlike. A secular outlook, for its part, trades finite existence for another finite existence, meant to extend life past the predecessor’s expiration date. In both instances, fire is the preferred medium of these transactions.

The idea that humanity must burn the earth in order to renew it is as old as humanity itself. Slash-and-burn agriculture or shifting cultivation (known as *jhum* in India; *milpa*, *conuco*, or *roza* in Latin America; *shamba* or *chitemene* in Africa; *rai* in Sweden, etc.<sup>6</sup>) has been practiced since the Neolithic period as a way to fertilize the soil with the ashes of vegetal matter that has gone up in flames. Plants, fungi, microbes, insects, and other animal

species are set ablaze in order to give room to the future, to stimulate the growth to come. On this view with thousands of ramifications, the world and life itself are constituted in and by fire, including, among other things, the practices of burning, or “fire-fallow cultivation,” and whatever is cultivated on burnt grounds. The more and more frequent forest fires ravaging a warming planet with drier climates and monoculture tree plantations extend the phenomenon of slash-and-burn agriculture beyond what is humanly intended. No one believes that the green phoenix<sup>7</sup> rising from the ashes of flaming biomass would be eternal. But everyone thinks and acts as though the series of resurrections it heralds would never come to an end. Nothing could be further from the truth. Land degradation soon depletes the soil of nutrients necessary for plant growth.<sup>8</sup> It is not only that the present is sacrificed for the sake of the future; the longer-term future is placed on the altar of the shorter-term one.

The phoenix complex is predicated on hope—the hope that death will not have the final word, that life and its slow-burning fires will resume in the ashes of past existence, that the earth and plants will stay fecund. But it is a hope that drives on a spiral of hopelessness (it is not by chance that, at the bottom of Pandora’s box, there was hope, among the other evils the box contained). With every twist, it becomes less and less objectively justifiable, and yet its strength is undiminished. The road to hell is paved with good intentions, and the road to environmental destruction is paved with hope, which is shaped like a phoenix. In various languages, there is a saying, “Hope dies last.”<sup>9</sup> We should hear the truth of this expression in a literal key: hope will have buried all of us along with a liveable planet before it, itself, dies out. It would have been better (more honest, more constructive) to adopt a stance of absolute hopelessness, not of a paralyzing variety but of a translucent kind that works as an antidote against the surfeit of self-deception. Such hopelessness could finally prompt us to care for the world, irrecoverable in any future iteration of expected growth. It could prompt us to care, if our hands and minds were not tied by the millennial bonds of the phoenix complex. And if someone dares write a utopian treatise for the twenty-first century, then an appropriate title for it would be (*contra* Bloch) *The Nonprinciple of Hopelessness*.

But what, exactly, is the phoenix complex? That no univocal definition of the term is possible is indicated by the word *complex*, which *per definitio-nem* eludes definitions. A mix of affects, ideas, images, and associations, it retains an *effective identity*, bolstering the claim to a widespread, generalizable (if not universalizable), and rapidly self-propagating, reproducible, stable *and* highly mobile mode of thinking and associated practices.

Before Bachelard, Sigmund Freud introduced the Oedipus complex in his 1899 *The Interpretation of Dreams* and further developed it in, among other books, *Totem and Taboo*. Psychoanalytically explained, a complex is a network of cathexes, of the bound quanta of libidinal energy that form a recognizable pattern of dreaming, feeling, thinking, and relating to oneself, to others, and to the world. As Freud puts it, emphasizing the affective component, “In the case of a psychical complex which has come under the influence of the censorship imposed by resistance, the *affects* are the constituent which is least influenced and which alone can give us a pointer as to how we should fill in the missing thoughts.”<sup>10</sup> And, still prior to Freud, Baruch Spinoza gave us hints as to the formation of a complex in the fifth part of his *Ethics*, where he postulated that “the greater the number of other images with which an image is associated, the more often it springs to life [*quo imago aliqua pluribus aliis iuncta est, eo saepius viget*]” (V.xiii).<sup>11</sup> The image of the phoenix boasts a wealth of such associations, which is why it not only frequently springs to life but also outlines the contours of that which we think of in connection with life and, by elision, with death.

Arrested, repressed, or pent-up affects form the grid of a complex in a manner similar to the conceptual grid of the schemata in Kant’s philosophy. No longer identifiable in their incipient form, myths that used to express, obliquely, these repressed libidinal forces (the myths of Oedipus, of Electra, of Prometheus, or of the phoenix) dissolve into the fabric of culture and the psyche. As myths shed their narrative identity, their power and effectiveness do not diminish; on the contrary, their hold on us, as well as on countless generations before and after us, grows stronger.<sup>12</sup> The reproducibility of any complex, its resurfacing with each new generation, lends it the characteristics of a psychocultural phoenix. So much so that we might say that the phoenix

complex is the complex of the complex, the apparatus (*dispositif*) by means of which every complex works, sets itself to work, or, even prior to that, is prepared for being put to work across temporal and spatial divides.

In contrast to the other protagonists of fire complexes, the phoenix is not a human, but a mythic bird. Its speciation and sexuation (which is—let us admit it already—highly unstable and multifarious, weaving together divine elements, animal and plant species, as well as male, female, and asexual specimens, while being inscribed in the phallic frame of masculine desire<sup>13</sup>) are the likely reasons for its relative obscurity, at least in Bachelard's oeuvre, compared to Prometheus and Empedocles. Whereas Prometheus stole fire from the gods and, with this theft, gave rise to technique, the phoenix, in an act of autocombustion, paves the way to life's regeneration. Thus, we are faced with technology, on the one hand, and nature, on the other. But fire is kindled in each of these "hands" or wings that are hard to keep apart, since life is not without its techniques (its mechanics and machinations), and technology is not without its reproductive capacities.

A figuration of nonhuman nature, the phoenix is a singular universal. The earliest cultural documents, where the creature is mentioned, starting with the Egyptian story of the bird *bennu* who is an incarnation of Atum, the ancient god of Heliopolis,<sup>14</sup> announce that the phoenix is so rare as to be one of a kind. Sixth-century Spanish theologian Isidore of Seville relates that "in the entire world, the phoenix is singular and unique [*sit in toto orbe singularis et unica*]." "The Arabs," he continues, "call someone singular a phoenix [*singularem 'phoenicem' vocant*]" (*Etymol.* 12.7.22). That is how singularity universalizes itself: it translates the proper name of a species into a common name, the word for singularity as such.

The phoenix is a species of one, as the Neoplatonist Porphyry argues in his commentary on Aristotle's *Categories*: "The bird species phoenix is not said to belong to several things differing in number, if indeed only one phoenix ever comes to be. If it is said of several things, they differ by succession [*diadochē*], not in number."<sup>15</sup> Isidore probably draws on third-century North African author Lactantius, who similarly highlights the uniqueness of the bird, inscribing her in the feminine: "*unica phoenix*" (*De ave phoenice*

31). Ambrose, the fourth-century Bishop of Milan, likewise considers the phoenix to be “one sole bird [*avem unicam*] not allowed to perish” (*Exameron* 5.23.79).

It is, furthermore, the singularity of the phoenix that permits her, him, or it to stand in the place of the universal, representing the whole of nature. The universalization of the singular proceeds along three paths.

The *first path* depends on the erasure of boundaries between different classes or types of beings in conventional systems of classification. Although the phoenix is a bird, the origins of its name are rather murky. Lactantius indicates that the territory of ancient Phoenicia (present-day Lebanon) shares its name with the phoenix and that, moreover, date palm (*Phoenix dactylifera*) is so called because the phoenix must die in a nest built on that tree.<sup>16</sup> “The aged bird,” he writes, “directs her swift flight to Assyria, upon which Venus herself bestowed the name Phoenicia [*Phoenices nomen cui dedit ipsa Venus*]” and “chooses a palm tree with the top towering high in the air, a tree which is so named thanks to the bird [*sublimem vertice palmam, quae gratum Phoenix ex ave nomen habet*]” (*De ave phoenice* 65–70). Two centuries prior to Lactantius, Roman philosopher Pliny the Elder, on the contrary, deduces the name of the bird from the tree: “The bird phoenix, who receives his name from a palm tree, dies together with it and is reborn of itself [*phoenice ave, quae putatur ex huius palmae argumento nomen accepisse, intermori ac renasci ex se ipsa*]” (*Historia naturalis* 13.ix.42). What is striking in Pliny’s description is that the tree must die together (*intermori*) with the bird who bears its name; more effectively than this very name, it is a shared death (intermortality, as we may baptize it in Latinized English) that succeeds in blurring the boundaries between the representatives of vegetal and animal kingdoms. In Fragment 3 of his *De natura*, third-century Pope Dionysius of Alexandria goes so far as to claim, in the spirit of catachrestic conceptual translation we have already detected in Isidore of Seville, that the appellation *phoenix* is a fitting one for all “long-lived creatures, be they animals or plants [*ta de makrobiōtata zōa te kai phyta*]” (Eusebius, *Praep. Evang.* 14.25.4).

From this brief sampling of classical sources, it becomes apparent that, despite its singularity, the phoenix participates in heterogeneous regions of existence: plant and animal worlds, the sun and other astronomic entities

such as the comets, the land of the creature's birth or death, dry high ground (*Benben*) and the watery abyss (*Nu*),<sup>17</sup> and the divine realm, from the Egyptian god Atum to Jesus of Nazareth, which explains the intense interest of early Christians in this symbol of resurrection. The indeterminacy of classical mentions of the phoenix is not a token of their failure to delineate its sense better, more clearly;<sup>18</sup> such indeterminacy is faithful to the central and overarching role prepared for the phoenix in the imagination of nature. The name also has a contribution to make here: whether common or proper, it is already a juncture of the singular and the universal, of a unique being so named or so designated and all other beings bearing the same appellation. As it names someone or something utterly singular, one of a kind, *phoenix* initially muddles the difference between proper and common names and goes on to level distinctions between types of beings, while preserving its own singularity. Out of this essential, irreducible confusion, it spreads out to all of nature and beyond—to supranatural being, the divine.

The *second path* to the universalization of the singular intersects with the first and activates the operations of synecdoche. In rhetoric, *synecdoche* is a figure of speech, through which a part represents the whole and, vice versa, the whole is condensed into one of its parts. Via a synecdoche, the phoenix does not gradually encroach on domains outside its own, but, as an exception to the general order of things, momentarily, in the bright flash of self-incineration, stands in for all organic being and even the inorganic elements. With some classical authors convinced that the phoenix is an actually existing creature, others persuaded that it is a figment of human imagination, and others still affirming its rarity and *probable* existence, the phoenix hovers between reality and fiction, something that grants it the privilege of a representative part, achieved, precisely, by its subtraction from the whole it represents. Throughout, the exceptionality of the phoenix enables synecdochic exchanges.

In a work by fourth-century Latin poet Claudian, the phoenix is a singular witness to the whole history of being: “You have seen everything that has ever been; you testify to the passing and turning of the ages [*vidisti quodcumque fuit; te saecula teste cuncta revolvuntur*]” (*Carmina minora* 27.104–105). In his *De carnis resurrectione*, second-century Christian author Tertullian



develops a complex synecdochic economy, where the whole is gathered in a part and a part manifests the whole with regard to the phoenix: “If the whole world faintly figures resurrection [*Si parum universitas resurrectionem figurat*] and if, moreover, there is no other such sign as this . . . , then take a most complete and unassailable symbol of our hope . . . I refer to the bird, which is peculiar to the East and famous for its singularity [*de singularitate famosum*], marvelous for its posthumous life, renewed from voluntary death” (13.1–6). While all of creation is a poorly perceived sign of resurrection, the phoenix is a glaring sign, a spectacular part that, jutting out from the rest, represents the whole.<sup>19</sup>

In the synecdoche of the phoenix and nature, the world or the universe, which Tertullian designates with the Latin *universitas*, is, like the mythic bird, one of a kind. And, also like the phoenix, it is periodically reborn from the ashes that remain after its incineration. The difference between the organic and the inorganic domains is flattened by fire: the fire of life itself, shooting off myriads of sparks that are the living, who engender similar new sparks; the cosmic fire of the sun and of other celestial bodies that enlivens and brings everything to appearance; and the inner fire of the earth, taking care of the gestation of metals in their ores and of the volcanic formation of mountain ranges. Heraclitan fire is everything that exists as well as the medium of exchange of the singular for the universal and of the universal for the singular: of death for a new life. The faint and inherently ambivalent figuration of the world—the world as a figure at once for itself and for something other than itself, namely for itself *othered*, refreshed, reborn—comes into visibility in the synecdochic light cast by the flames that consume the aged body of the phoenix.

Another dimension of the phoenix–nature synecdoche is epistemological, rather than *stricto sensu* ontological. In his study *De natura animalium*, the second-century Roman author Claudius Aelianus praises the phoenix’s exceptional wisdom, astute mathematical skill and geographical knowledge. “The phoenix,” writes Aelianus, “knows how to count five hundred years without the aid of arithmetic, since it is the disciple of all-wise nature [*mathētai phuseōs tēs sōphōtatēs ontes*], so that it has no need of fingers or anything else to aid it in the understanding of numbers” (6.58). The bird

also knows where Egypt is situated and uses this knowledge to transport its predecessor's remains for burial in Heliopolis. While, as Aelianus emphasizes, humans (priests and scientists alike) bicker about the appropriate methods for counting years and while prized human wisdom deals with such things as “the affairs of the market, armaments, and other schemes of human mutual undoing [*ta agoraia kai ta enoplia kai tas allas tōn antrhōpōn eis allēlous te kai kat allēlōn epiboulas epoumen sophā*]” (6.58), the phoenix is imbued with the knowledge of nature as the embodiment of nature's own self-knowledge. The closest “disciple” of nature, the phoenix is a part of the whole, concentrating in itself the self-relation of that whole.

The epistemological facets of the phoenix–nature synecdoche contribute to the dismantling of the distinction between reality and fiction. There is no need to be “astonished” with the inclusion of the phoenix in serious naturalistic and historiographic works by the likes of Pliny the Elder, Tacitus, or Gaius Julius Solinus.<sup>20</sup> As a part of the whole it expresses, the phoenix both exists and doesn't exist in actuality, a symbolic supplement of the totality, which does not come into being as the totality that it is before this event of supplementation. If the phoenix's presence among crocodiles and eagles and oysters is unusual, it is not so due to the creature's purely invented, fantastic character but due to the phoenix's special status vis-à-vis nature, compared to other creatures. It is a part that stands apart from the rest and, thanks to this apartness, is able to reflect the whole.

The *third path* to universalizing the singular traverses the terrain of reproducibility, repeatability, and replaceability. Lactantius conveys many of the promises and ambiguities latent in the self-reproduction of the phoenix, in her replacement by herself as other to herself, female and male: “She is her own offspring, her father and her heir [*Ipsa sibi proles, suus est pater et suus haeres*]. . . . The same indeed, but not the same; the very one, yet not the one [*Ipsa quidem, sed non eadem, quia et ipsa, nec ipsa est*]” (*De ave phoenix* 165–170). With these words, Lactantius echoes Tertullian, who notes that, reborn, the phoenix is “once more where just now there was none; once more himself, but just now out of existence; another, yet the same [*iterum phoenix ubi nemo iam, iterum ipse qui non iam, alius idem*]” (*De carnis resurrectione* 13.8–9).

The confluence of sameness and otherness in a flaming reincarnation is the crux of the phoenix complex as far as its environmental and philosophical dimensions are concerned. The body and the life of the phoenix are, despite their uniqueness and inimitability, replaceable—by no one but the phoenix her-, him-, or itself. If there is neither time nor a good reason to mourn the loss of a weary life ebbing away from the aging bird, that is because self-replacement in the other, who is and is not the old self, is assured. The gap between different iterations of the same existence (“once more where just now there was none”) is a minor interval illuminated, scorched, and immediately hidden, swept under the rug of being by the powers of fire. Generations upon generations of living (and dying) creatures are understood on the basis of this same otherness: the next generation is both next and not next; this one is and is not the preceding one. “Once more” existence recomposes itself, replacing itself by itself as other. That is what comes next, if it indeed comes.

Given the identification of the phoenix with the whole of existence (in particular, with the whole of nature), its recovery from the clutches of death no longer belongs squarely to the realm of the fantastic; this event comes to describe, instead, our millennia-old relation to and representation of nature’s reproduction or self-reproduction. In the best of scenarios, when its loss is not altogether ignored, biological life is mournable only when it is not replaced, or, rather, not replaceable, by itself as other to itself. The psychological weight of mass extinction balances on (or falls with) the irreplaceability of the lost species. Yet, even here, mourned irreplaceability is diluted and reintegrated into the logic of the phoenix complex via suggestions to create genetic databanks (in the case of plants, seed archives), the DNA archives of endangered species that can be resurrected from the stored blueprint of their basic makeup at will. The classification of biofuels—for instance, ethanol, distilled from sugar cane, or biodiesel, derived from soybean oil—as renewable sources of energy alongside solar, hydro, and other elemental energy alternatives is the phoenix complex at its purest, seeing that the reproducibility (*renewability*) of the burnt elevates this mode of energy production to an ideal environmental practice.<sup>21</sup>

From Plato to twentieth-century French Jewish author Emmanuel Levinas, philosophers, too, have trodden the third path toward the

universalization of the singular so frequently that it has, by now, become a metaphysical highway of sorts.<sup>22</sup> According to the philosophical recipe whether directly or indirectly inspired by the tale of the phoenix, the unique can be replaced by itself as other to itself by means of either or both biological and cultural reproductions. Seeking the infinity that dwells in finitude, as the word *infinite* already intimates, philosophers tease out that in a living being which temporally, conceptually, physically, or psychically exceeds this very being, the excess granting it the quality of aliveness in the first place. From the speech of Diotima, which Socrates reports in Plato's *Symposium* (208a-b), to Levinas's notion of fecundity and ethical substitution, the "mechanics" of overcoming finitude and mortality have been, for all intents and purposes, unchanged. In keeping with the phoenix's spectacular resurrection and the cunning of reason it encapsulates, everything finite keeps itself by letting go of itself, by losing its identity and recovering what has been lost in a new version of the same existence, "another, yet the same."

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At this point, I am obliged to interrupt the relatively smooth expository flow of the phoenix complex so as to consider an issue that, apparently secondary, needs to be addressed from very early on, because it will be the touchstone of subsequent discussions. The issue is that of sexual difference.<sup>23</sup> Lactantius is one of a handful of classical authors who writes about the phoenix in the feminine. Earlier still, first-century CE Roman geographer Pomponius Mela observes that the phoenix is "always unique," *semper unica* (the adjective in the feminine), and that she "is not conceived by copulation nor born through parturition [*non enim coitu concipitur partuve generatur*]" (*De chorographia* 3.72). This qualification plainly presages the immaculate conception of Jesus, but it also raises the question: Why should the bird be male or female if it does not reproduce by sexual means? How does the gendered adjective in the Latin assertion of the phoenix's absolute uniqueness both contradict and intensify that very assertion?

The thread of sexual difference is tied in a knot with those of mortality and individuation. The asexual reproduction of organisms by cell division renders them virtually immortal and less individuated than those that employ

sexual reproduction; the awareness of an impending death bestows on us the most intense, painful individuality and, drawing attention to the body and its finitude, puts us face-to-face with the reality of sexual difference; individuality as a dialectical achievement requires a negation of a simple identity, the negation that mimics the nullifying effects of death and confronts us with another sex (or with other sexes). In the story of the phoenix, the three threads in this conceptual knot are both present and absent, affirmed and denied, acknowledged and repudiated: the phoenix is both mortal and immortal, unique to the point of being a *she* and (asexually) reproducible, the same and the other. The technical psychoanalytic word for the simultaneous acknowledgment and repudiation of something is *disavowal*.

By dint of disavowal, then, the phoenix complex is put to work, at the same time affirming and denying death, sexual difference, and individuality. It does so on the largest scale imaginable, since the phoenix is a synecdoche for nature. In our deeply ingrained attitudes toward the worlds of plants, animals, and bacteria, and to the milieus of the earth, the atmosphere, and the oceans, we disavow the finitude, individual uniqueness, and sexual differences of actors in the ecological drama. Lulled by the cadences of natural cycles, long since fatefully disrupted, extended, or contracted, thanks to the artefacts and by-products of human industry—the cycles that include those of birth and death—we deem existence invariably reproducible either in itself or in the other. Everything happens as though death did not have the final word at the levels of the genes, the ecosystems, and the elements that are also supposed to “regenerate.” It is this *as though*, a fiction we keep telling ourselves without the least awareness of reproducing *it* at the expense of the world, that provides the essential ingredient for the disavowal that sets the phoenix complex to work.

Since Greek antiquity, philosophers have singled out two types of reproduction: in oneself and in the other. Hegel only gave these types and their interrelation the crispest expression in his *Philosophy of Nature*. The phoenix, for his part, reproduces himself in himself as in the other and in the other as in himself, not mediating but compressing the extremes of sameness and otherness, as well as life and death, into each another. Refracted through the Hegelian prism, such reproduction is colored in distinctly vegetal hues.

According to Hegel, in the world of plants, “The process of formation and of reproduction of the *singular* individual in this way coincides with the process of the genus and is a perennial production of new individuals.”<sup>24</sup> The individual and the genus are immediately one, as they are when it comes to the phoenix. The life of plants is their constant rebirth, their survival of themselves as others and of others as themselves. Following from this is an equally constant reinvention of nature, of *phusis* or *natura* as the overall movement of burgeoning-birthing. A perennial renaturing of nature, perhaps. Magnified and reprojected onto biological existence in general, vegetal “perennial production” yields a model for the resurrection of the biosphere from the ashes, to which it has been reduced.<sup>25</sup> The phoenix is always green.

Not by accident, the phoenix is reinstated in her vegetal incarnation. The synecdoche plant–nature, upon which I have commented elsewhere,<sup>26</sup> mirrors the synecdoche phoenix–nature. And there is more: the temporary erasure of individuality and sexual difference allows for the elimination of the third thread that invariably accompanies them, namely mortality. But the dismissal of sexual difference is bound to fail. Has this difference not initially arisen in the kingdom of plants that have both sexual and asexual methods of reproduction at their disposal? Doesn’t the indeterminacy of vegetal sexuation, also evident in the figure of the phoenix, apply not only to the question *Which sex is it?* but also, and above all, to the question *Does it have a sex at all?*

The indeterminacy of sexual difference in plants and the phoenix alike points toward a similar equivocation with respect to their individuation and finitude. In sexual reproduction, some of the main protagonists are seeds or the seed, straddling the divide between plant and animal classes of being. (See the first path toward the universalization of the singular.) Soon after noting that the phoenix is utterly unique, Ambrose goes on to say that it “reproduces itself from its own seed [*resurgentem eam sui semine*]” (*Exameron* 5.23.79). The Latin *sēmen* can mean plant seeds as much as semen. In other versions of the myth, the rebirth of the phoenix is made possible by the fire of the sun that symbolizes the male side of the sexual relation. Twelfth-century Byzantine poet Johannes Tzetzes writes that the phoenix “builds its nest of delightful smell on trees / And when it dies, is born again as a worm

from that tree / And then is nourished by the heat of the sun [*thalpomenos hēliō*] and turns into a phoenix once again” (*Chiliad* 5.390–393).<sup>27</sup> Being born again from the tree that has served as its last habitat, the phoenix is also nourished in the manner of plants by solar energy that substitutes the flames, in which the bird is reborn in keeping with the widely known storyline. With its belonging to the plant or animal kingdom rendered more indeterminate than ever before, the individuation of the phoenix is also unfixed.

The ambiguity that envelops the phoenix’s finitude complements the indeterminacy of its sexuation and individuation. While some depict the rebirth of the new phoenix from the ashes of the old, other authors, such as Tzetzes (but also Pliny the Elder and first-century CE Roman historian Tacitus), stress her resurrection through the spontaneous generation of a single worm or of maggots from her dead flesh. (The relative oblivion, to which the latter narratives have been subjected, is yet another symptom of the operations of the phoenix complex.) Be this as it may, a place of dwelling, a tomb, and a womb for renewed existence converge on the nest, which the ageing bird builds for herself at the end of her long life. Second-century CE Greek poet Dionysius Periegetes, notes that the phoenix “makes itself a pyre for death or a nest for life [*puran tina tēs teleutēs hē kalian suntithēsi tēs zōēs*]” (*De aucupio* 1.32). Sixth-century Gallo-Roman historian Gregory of Tours writes that the phoenix “builds for itself its nest or grave [*construit sibi seu nidum sive sepulchrum*]” (*De curso stellarum ratio* 12).

Confusion about the receptacle for life or for death further escalates when Tacitus treats it as an actual womb, from which the young phoenix will emerge. In this rendition of the myth, the phoenix “builds a nest in his own land and then pours forth his genital force into the nest, from which the fetus arises [*suis in terris struere nidum eique vim genitalem adfundere, ex qua fetum oriri*]” (*Annals* 6.28). The vital fluid (*vis genitalis*, i.e., the semen) reveals that the phoenix is male, but, more interestingly, Tacitus is evoking a situation, in which the seed of an animal impregnates a feminized vegetal structure that is the nest. With the addition of the sun, which Tzetzes endows with a fiery and phallic function, or of the lightning that strikes the old phoenix with its “life-giving dart” in Claudian (*Carmina minora* 27.57–60), impersonal

environmental forces and objects participate in the bird's reproduction on the suspended edge of life and death.

The crux of the matter is that disparate accounts of the phoenix's sexualization, life, death, and individual attributes do not (only) contingently clash with one another owing to the heterogeneous traditions and historical strata they belong to, from the Egyptian *bennu* and the earliest extant Coptic text on the phoenix to classical and late antiquities. Rather, the inconsistency of these accounts is an effect of the equivocal triple knot, tied in the figure of the mythic bird, who is both mortal and immortal; individuated to the point of absolute uniqueness and utterly generic; male, female, and sexless. By means of the synecdoche, in which the phoenix relates to all existence as a part that condenses the whole, the equivocations (three in one and one in three) reflect on *us*—on our relation to the outside world and to ourselves. Our hitherto undiagnosed phoenix complex does not permit us to be at a safe distance from the plants, the earth, and the atmosphere consumed by the flames. In them and as them, we, too, are burning, alongside the past and the future that are not ours. We, too, are the phoenix.

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Already in Heraclitus, fire is the element of transformation. *Puros tropai*, the turns or turnings of fire, mentioned in Fragment 31, are the revolutions of becoming, through which every element is eventually sifted. Fire's turns or turnings, in their turn, should make sense in the light of Fragment 30, which speaks of "fire everlasting, kindling in measures and going out in measures [*pur aeizōon, aptomenon metra kai aposbennumenon metra*]."28 The phoenix is, on this view, a spark of cosmic fire, which, on an exceptional basis, makes fire's turnings in general phenomenally accessible and which, in the spectacular display of its rebirth, hypostatizes the passage from going out in measures to kindling in measures.<sup>29</sup> The measured extinguishing and reigniting of her life testify to the ever-living (*aeizōon*) nature of the fire she seizes by delivering herself to it: the fire of vitality, infinite across its finite instantiations, infinitely self-regenerating past the term of each living being and its milieu. And, because the microcosm and the macrocosm are the



mirror images of one another, the periodic lighting up and dimming down of the world's ensouled body would be transposed onto our own bodies and lives, their fires not to be snuffed out once and for all.

The transformation of the phoenix in fire, or with the help of the fire released by the sun or by lightning, is the passage from a threadbare life through death to a fresh life. His death is, far from the end, a strange detour from life to life, a bright flash, after which the body of the bird is reconstituted not in the yonder of heaven, but here below. It is for this reason that the early Christians, of the likes of Tertullian, saw in the phoenix the answer to the problem of resurrection *in the flesh*.

Claudian expresses the notion of a fiery death as a break and a continuation in the chain of lives with beautiful discursive economy: "The adjoining twinned lives are separated in the exact middle by a burning fire [*geminae confinia vitae exiguo medius discrimine separat ignis*]" (*Carmina minora* 27.70–71). In a breathtaking fashion, he articulates life and death as the varying modalities and intensities of the same fiery life (just as day and night are articulated in the same unity of *one day*, a twenty-four-hour cycle). A brief flaming interval is wedged between the past and the future existences of the phoenix, distinguished from one another by virtue of this wedge. The effacement of death happens, tellingly, before the instant of resurrection, in the very moment of death, construed in terms of an elemental figuration of life in and as fire. Death is rid of its sting to the extent that it is deprived not of its finality but of its being-death: fire, which discriminates between lives, is itself a living, moving, growing, decaying, propagating animal or plant, Heraclitan *pur aeizōon*. The break between two lives is not a break; it is a sublime continuation of life in a different, cosmic or elemental, register, where *pueros tropai*, the turnings of fire, turn death inside out into life.

Here is how Lactantius narrates the turnings of fire in the phoenix's death-birth: "Meanwhile her body, by birth-giving death destroyed [*interea corpus genitali morte peremptum*], grows warm, and its heat itself births a flame, and from the ethereal light from afar it conceives fire" (*De ave phoenix* 95–98). A "birth-giving death" is another way of saying the "phoenix complex." This gnostic-sounding formulation implies both forgetting death and reveling in it, living under the illusion of one's immortality and running

or flying toward death as toward a gateway to the future. Transfixed by the phoenix, we forget death, because it is nowhere to be found and because it happens all around us, to others, whether human or not. At the same time, and equally mesmerized by the phoenix, we revel in death. When it is contemplated at all, assuaging the fear it awakens in us, it takes the shape of another life, suffused with “ethereal light” and “heat,” *calor*, or of a birth into another life, perhaps a better one: refreshed, reinvigorated, more independent inasmuch as self-given.

The blurring of boundaries between distinct kinds of beings and the apparatus of synecdoche that, each in its own way, universalizes the singularity of the phoenix signal that the phoenix’s life and death (or nondeath) are life and death *as such*. When contemporary science focuses on genes instead of their carriers, it is still wandering in phoenix’s tracks or following her flight paths. Triumph over death at the level of individual bodies translates into an analogous triumph at the level of ecosystems. Although nuclear flames block the rebirth of whatever they touch, there are plenty of ideologically laden attempts nowadays to present Chernobyl as a magnificent phoenix reborn from the nuclear ashes. Isn’t plant and animal life making its comeback in the “exclusion zone” abandoned by humans in the aftermath of the disaster? There is, however, very little awareness of the fact that decomposition rates in the most contaminated areas of Chernobyl are exceptionally low, given the near absence of microorganisms and soil invertebrates who carry out this process.<sup>30</sup> With the accumulation of vegetal matter on the forest floor, devastating fires become widespread, leading to new smaller-scale fallouts due to the resuspension of nuclear particles in the air.<sup>31</sup> The death of death, which the phoenix complex celebrates, is manifest in nuclear disasters and environmental devastation. That is why its philosophical investigation is irreducible to a mental exercise, bearing instead on some of the most urgent practical problems and impasses of our times.

Nevertheless, mixing the rejection and the affirmation of rotting, the phoenix complex already contains the resources necessary for working through it, the resources that await those determined to overcome cultural amnesia, itself symptomatic of heavy repression. The dominant variant of the myth involves, no doubt, a fiery death and a nearly immediate resurrection.

This variant itself is not uniform; it accommodates a plethora of reports, ranging from the phoenix entrusting herself to a blaze she did not spark to the phoenix generating fire from his own body or from his body's interactions with wood.

In its earliest (Alexandrian) rendition from the second century CE, *Physiologus* states that the phoenix “sets itself ablaze” or “kindles the fire by itself” (*kai auto to pur anaptei*) (7). Fourth-century Bishop of Salamis Epiphanius of Cyprus specifies in *Ancoratus* how, “with its wings, having beaten its own breast many times, bringing forth fire from its body [*pur hapo tou sōmatos autou propheromenos*], it sets afire the underlying wood” (84.4). Other authors, such as Claudian or Ambrose, postulate an external source of fire, be it the sun or lightning, while later texts depict the kindling of fire by an environmental force in combination with the rapid beating of the phoenix's wings.<sup>32</sup>

Perhaps the most interesting among these is the poetic version presented by sixth-century Christian grammarian Joannes de Gaza in his *Discriptio tabulae mundi*: “clapping its wings [*kinumenōn pterugōn*],” the phoenix who places itself opposite the sun, endeavors “to seize the blaze [*phlogos harpazein*]” of the sunray and to immolate itself of its own accord (2.215–218). A Promethean leitmotif runs through this account of rebellion, in which nature rises up against nature, unleashing a *contranatura* force within *natura*: the phoenix positioned over and against the sun, stealing the solar ray, not clinging to its waning biological vitality, and earning the right to be by renouncing its actual being.<sup>33</sup> But, whereas the theft of fire by Prometheus sets the scene for the technology of artifacts, producing and reproducing the prosthetic supports for a vulnerable and naked existence in this life, the capture of a sunray by the phoenix lifts the curtain on the technology of salvation, producing and reproducing life beyond death.<sup>34</sup> If the basic “Promethean structure” is being-for-death,<sup>35</sup> that is, of adjusting better to the harshness of life with the horizon of absolute finitude, the structure of the phoenix is being-for-deathlessness, or surpassing this horizon and de-absolutizing finitude.

Whatever the source of fire, in an act of self-immolation, the phoenix as synecdoche burns all of nature with the intention of reinvigorating life

itself. According to the rules of the game dictated by the phoenix complex, by burning the world, we burn ourselves (unless it is the world that burns itself through us), albeit unintentionally so. A synecdoche is, after all, reversible. This act is what in theology is designated with the Hebrew word *'olah* or the Greek *holokaustos* (the whole burned), an offering, in which the sacrificial victim is entirely consumed by fire. The combustion of fossils is their rebirth, albeit without the singularity of the phoenix, seeing that they are extracted and incinerated en masse, as mass. The life–death relation is also inverted here: between the millions of years it takes to liquify, gasify, or petrify vegetal and animal remains and the eternity of *mass* extinction, there is only a flash of combustion, enlivening our technologies. The life, or the afterlife, of the fossil phoenix is but a punctuation mark between one death and another.<sup>36</sup>

Lurking in those phoenix narratives that emphasize the bird's immolation is the tacit desire to skirt decay. This desire is rooted in two affects, namely impatience and disgust, that are themselves correlated with time and matter. Jointly, they rebuff finitude. Claudian's phoenix realizes that he must prepare his own funeral pyre when his "bright eye grows dim [*decrescit lumen*] and the pupil becomes palsied by the frost of years" and when "his wings, wont to cleave the clouds of heaven, can scarce be raised from the earth" (*Carmina minora* 27.36–40). The decrease of the inner flame of the eye (*decrescit lumen*) calls for reanimation with external fire, the medium of the bird's rebirth. Between decline and renewed vigor, the impatience of the phoenix is double. On the one hand, he is unwilling to accept senescence and the gradual approach of death, which, while still impending, robs the body of its innate powers and capacities. On the other hand, he rejects the slowness of decomposition, impatient with what happens *after* death. Just as the bird's life in its late stages is fast forwarded to its final moment, so a transformation into a new version of its existence that follows is sped up.

The impatience of the phoenix is also ours within the complex that bears her name. With the global growth of an elderly population,<sup>37</sup> already at its highest level ever, geriatric care and cosmetic industries are flourishing in response to the demand to minimize and delay the onset of aging and its visible signs. A more radical demand that often goes under the name of transhumanism is to do away with aging altogether, to discover by scientific

means the fountain of eternal youth, a perennial capacity for self-renewal, keeping close to the event of birth, circling back to it over and over again, and being reborn—perhaps, renatured even, reinitiated into the order of life. Stem cell therapy research, with its associated promises and risks, is tending in this direction. What our fantasies of life without senescence and decrepitude ignore is that, to skip aging, to elude death, one needs to die all the faster and more spectacularly, literally to burn oneself up. Some of the lethal side effects of experimental treatments, including stem cell therapy, are subtle reminders of this paradoxical logic.

Impatience with mortality and with the physical changes an aging being experiences goes hand in hand with the desire for unlimited energy. (Entropy is, after all, the energy equivalent of death and dying in a system.) Combustion has a central place in the energy paradigm that, breaking matter down, effects a fast release of heat and light, the fiery element of the phoenix. Energy extraction wrests potentiality from an actual body that contains it, while destroying this body, reducing it, precisely, to a mere discardable container. Similarly, the sublime mechanics of phoenix's reproduction draw the infinite from finite corporeality, abandoned as something superfluous at best and as an obstacle on the path to renewal at worst. Matter and its forms are treated as no more than shells, hiding the valuable kernel of potentiality or infinity. Fire, into which the phoenix, fossils or biodiesel, our entire planet, and we ourselves are thrown, institutes another regime of phenomenality: an unsustainable vision of the future that would repeat, indefinitely, the present.

In addition to impatience with finite time, permeating the phoenix complex is disgust with rotting, with the finitude and materiality of the flesh. At the most immediate, sensory level, the sight and smell of decomposition are obviated in the flaming resurrection of the phoenix. Virtually all classical authors, from Herodotus and Ovid to Clement of Rome, Lactantius, and Ambrose, bring up olfactory issues related to death. The phoenix builds its last nest with aromatic herbs and spices—myrrh and cinnamon, above all. Animal flesh burning with fragrant vegetal materials neutralizes the sensory evidence of death.

Fifth-century Christian poet Dracontius explains that the phoenix ignites the flames of its funeral pyre by beating against the aromatic wood of

the nest with its wings: “*et verberat alas / ut flammam adsciscat avis (sic nascitur ignis) / ante alitem ambrosios iam consumpturus odore*” (Romulea 10.107–109). The bird gives birth not only to its future self but also to the medium of its rebirth, taking over the signature activity of nature itself. Fire is born from the phoenix (*sic nascitur ignis*) who is consumed by the flames so as to be reborn: the self-annihilating and self-generating circle of its action is closed without a glitch, without as little as a hint of decay, which is the whiff of death.

The fire raging in scented wood and aromatic herbs muffles the smell of decomposition, but that is not the only reason for choosing it as the element of resurrection. As the Hebrew term *’olah*, which I have already mentioned, indicates, flames allow a burnt offering to be lifted up in smoke, to be nearly disencumbered of the heaviness of matter and handed over to the heavens. In a Hegelian vein, we might say that fire is a material element which borders on ideality, opposing and negating, as it does, the materials it is burning in, and yet dependent on these very materials.<sup>38</sup> Wafting from aromatic herbs heated by the sun, fragrant smells move along a similar trajectory, foreshadowing (less violently, perhaps) the ascension of the body and of the spirit.<sup>39</sup> When matter is raised in and as smoke, it is almost dematerialized, and whatever is left of it is reduced to ash, which is next to nothing. The desiccated, minimal remnants of corporeal materiality dispense with the stage of decay and the revulsion that the sensory facets of decomposition tend to provoke.

In the self-generation of the phoenix who will be different from, but also the same as, her predecessor, we may spot a peculiar relation to the notion of identity and to the third path of universalizing the singular. Besides being a visceral reaction to the outcomes of decay, disgust is an affective response to the changing shape of the corpse, slowly tending toward amorphousness. There are two possible solutions to this inexorable alteration: fixing a material form in its present mold or, conversely, speeding up change. Somewhat counterintuitive, the second strategy is the one the phoenix embraces. The idea is to accelerate change so much that it will become barely perceptible, the new incarnation almost instantaneously supplanting the old. Although in the course of a gradual alteration changes are imperceptible as well, a comparison of freeze-frame shots taken at different stages of the process allows us

to register them. The fiery metamorphosis of the phoenix, where everything and nothing is altered, does not afford the spectators this opportunity; in the version that has magnetized cultural imagination, little more than a bright flash, as blinding as it is revelatory, separates the old from the new.

If the phoenix is a synecdoche of nature, then the impatience and disgust it betrays are impatience with the slow pace of periodic decay-and-renewal cycles and disgust with the material transformations of the body and the outside world. The phoenix's corpse is the corpse of nature itself; its aging, conflagration, and ashes—the aging, conflagration, and ashes of nature. Furthermore, if the phoenix as the condensation of the whole of nature in a single animal-vegetal-elemental figure is both the same and not the same after its fiery revival, then there is no such thing as nature—only natures, continually dying and being swiftly reborn.

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Supposing that, as I have already argued, the resources for overcoming the phoenix complex lie hidden in the complex itself, it is necessary to pay close attention to the alternative versions of the story that have been largely forgotten, or that, at least, do not immediately come to mind at the mention of this mythical character. The versions I am referring to welcome decay as a source of spontaneous generation or regeneration of life from the dead body of the phoenix. Here, the flesh itself, even when it is already rotting, is seen as a marvelous brooder of life.

In Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, the old phoenix arranges his aromatic nest, in which he lies down and puts an end to himself: “*se super inponit finitque in odoribus aevum*” (15.400). Then, “a small phoenix is reborn from the body of the father [*corpore de patrio parvum phoenica renasci*]” and, when he is strong enough, carries “his cradle, which is also his father's grave [*pius cunasque suas patriumque sepulcrum*]” to the city of Hyperion to be offered at the altar of the city's temple (15.402–407). The coincidence of one phoenix's grave and another's cradle is poignant in light of the reproductive potential of the dead: it is from the corpse of his predecessor that the small phoenix emanates. The city of Hyperion, to which the young phoenix takes his cradle-grave, is the city of the sun, the ancient Heliopolis (*helios huperion* [the sun up

above], is a citation from Homer's *Odyssey* [12.346]) featured in the original exposition by Herodotus. The inference to be made is that the remains of the deceased bird along with the nest are burned on the altar of the sun god already after the offspring is strong enough to make an offering on behalf of the dead ancestor.

Ovid does not elucidate how the rebirth of the phoenix happens, though it definitely does not entail a flaming transformation, which is postponed until the time when the offspring is already mature. Ambrose gives a more detailed account: "When the phoenix realizes that he is coming to the end of his life, he builds himself a casket of incense, myrrh, and other aromatic plants, into which he enters and dies when his time comes [*impleto vitae suae tempore*]. From the moisture proceeding from his flesh, a worm emerges [*De cuius humore carnis vermis exurgit*]. In the course of time [*Ac processu statuti temporis*], he puts on 'the oarage of his wings' until the bird is restored to his primitive form and appearance" (*Exaemeron* 5.23.79).

I will bring three details of Ambrose's description into sharper relief. First, the passage of time is welcomed, reiterated twice: in relation to the moment of death when "his life's time is completed" (*impleto vitae suae tempore*), and in relation to the metamorphosis of the worm into the phoenix "in due time," or "in the course of time," (*ac processu statuti temporis*). Second, rather than fire, it is the "moisture of his flesh," (*humore carnis*) that generates the worm; instead of the phallic fiery element, it is a watery substance that permits the phoenix to be reborn. There is, consequently, neither impatience nor disgust in Ambrose's account. Third, the generativity of the corpse is in line with what, well into the Medieval period, was known as *generatio aequivoca* (spontaneous generation). The emergence of maggots or flies from rotting meat is a paradigmatic example of the phenomenon,<sup>40</sup> identified at least since the times of Aristotle and scientifically disproven by Italian naturalist and physician Francesco Redi as late as 1668.<sup>41</sup> By means of *generatio aequivoca*, the reproductive potential of the dead comes to the fore. The miraculous origination of life from a corpse obeys the logic of the phoenix in a different way, no longer allergic to the process of decomposition.

Pomponius Mela sexualizes the putrefaction fluid of the dead phoenix, implicitly equating it with the seminal liquid, with which the bird will



inseminate himself in his afterlife. “The phoenix,” he writes, “broods on a funeral pile heaped up with different scented plants and decomposes. Next, after congealing from the moisture of its putrefying limbs, the bird conceives herself and is born from herself [*dein putrescentium membrorum tabe concrescens ipsa se concipit atque ex se rursus renascitur*]” (*De chorographia* 3.72–73). A dead body becomes the source and the incubator of new life. By virtue of the phoenix’s inscription in the feminine, as well as the mention of brooding, and the bird’s postmortem self-insemination and self-conception, sexualization accomplished from the side of death acquires a richly hermaphroditic feel.

Mela’s take is rather surprising when examined against Aristotle’s theory of spontaneous generation. For the Greek philosopher, sexual difference accounts for the production of an offspring of the same kind (*homogenē*), whereas resorting to spontaneous generation means that the “offspring are not identical with their parents.” Aristotle continues in *De generatione animalium*, “Such are the creatures which come into being not as a result of the copulation of living animals, but out of putrescent soil and out of residues” (715a). In principle, as a result of reliance on spontaneous generation, the progeny of the phoenix might not be identical to the predecessor, since this mode of procreation is much more indeterminate and open-ended than sexual reproduction (maggots and flies are born of rotting horse meat, whereas only horses are born of living horses). Nevertheless, Mela mixes the two methods—the sexual and the spontaneous—by sexualizing the phoenix’s putrefaction fluid, which plays a lead role in her self-conception. With this, cross-generational identity, threatened by spontaneous reproduction, is secured, albeit at the price of the indeterminate future of fecund remains.<sup>42</sup>

The liquid origins of the phoenix are also conspicuous in a reference by fifth-century CE Egyptian grammarian, Horapollon. In Horapollon’s encyclopedic work *Hieroglyphica*, the entry for “How Great Cyclical Renovation Happens,” states, “When the phoenix is about to die, he casts himself vehemently upon the ground, and is wounded by the blow, and from the ichor, which flows from the wound, another phoenix is produced [*ex sanie vero (vulneris) defluente, alius gignitur*]” (2.lvii). The self-inflicted wound is a variation on the theme of self-sacrifice, without, however, any recourse

to fire. The offspring then arises from the wounded, yet still living, body of the father, with whom he is a contemporary for a short while. The two travel to Heliopolis, where the older phoenix dies at sunrise, which is itself the birth of a new day.<sup>43</sup> The “great cyclical renovation” transpires when the end meets a new beginning, the one flowing into the other. Curiously, in Horapollo’s implicit understanding, reproductive capacity (and, perhaps, sexuality *in toto*, though, as described, the process does not involve mating) is a self-inflicted wound, enabling the renewal of the genus at the expense of individual specimens, who fulfill their “end” in this act.

Pliny the Elder points to the bones and marrow of the phoenix’s corpse as the place, whence life resprouts: “From its bones and marrow is born initially a little worm, before becoming a chick [*Ex ossibus deinde et medullis eius nasci primo ceu vermiculum, inde fieri pullum*]” (*Historia naturalis* 10.ii.4). Decomposition must be already advanced for the bones and their marrow to be laid bare and to give rise to a small worm. Further, the emergence of the young phoenix is quasi-vegetal: she is born from a hard kernel (like that of a fruit) that, in life, is wrapped in soft fleshy tissues. Seldom is the skeletal system seen as essential to anything but the support of a living body or as the remnant of a dead one verging on the inorganic. For Pliny, however, it is the innermost chamber of corporeality, holding the seeds of rejuvenated life.

The subterranean, chthonic, and “humid”<sup>44</sup> current of the phoenix narrative is the repressed underside of the bird’s glorious resurrection. This other phoenix does not eschew the slowness of time’s passage nor does it exhibit disgust toward a material transformation. As Dutch scholar of world religions Roel van den Broek reminds us, several classical authors were abreast of the existence of the two traditions (of fiery self-renewal and of emanation from a decaying body) and even tried to integrate mutually exclusive scripts in their texts.<sup>45</sup> Notable in this regard are Lactantius, Epiphanius of Cyprus, and the unknown author of the third-century Christian treatise *Didascalica apostolorum*. More than a mere historical curiosity or a contingent finding of intellectual archaeology interested in the myth of the phoenix, the duality in question bespeaks a complex approach to finitude, with the blindingly bright upside and the shadowy underside of its overcoming.

There are sundry cultural, religious, ideological, and phenomenological reasons for the prevalence of the narrative upside over the underside, reasons that explain the notoriety of flaming regeneration and the near oblivion, to which a slow transformation in the course of decomposition has been subject. Obviously, I am extending here my earlier argument on the equivocations of the triple knot (sexuation, individuation, and death) tied in the story of the phoenix. This addendum is important in its own right: it taps into the repressed resources that may be of some use for immanently overcoming an ecologically and intellectually pernicious set of beliefs and practices, that is to say, for working through the phoenix complex. The apocalyptic mood, which is prevalent in contemporary ecological thought on the obverse side of the complex, shows, precisely, the inability or the unwillingness to work through it, acting out its negation instead.

Whereas both traditions concern themselves with the fact and the mechanics of regeneration—of the phoenix and, hence, of nature or natures—they outline divergent means for reaching the same end. The wager of a fiery rebirth is on the ideality of self-substitution; in a slow emergence from a decaying or wounded body, the emphasis is on material metamorphoses. The ideal that the first strategy envisions is realized thanks to the contraction of time and the elimination, or sublimation, of matter in fire. The materiality of the second strategy requires tarrying with (and within) the flow of time, attending to decomposition, to the fluxes and miraculous upshots of decay that, in a variety of forms, circle back to life after the threshold of death has been crossed. Synthetic and, to some extent, syncretistic accounts, marrying strands from the two traditions, are, therefore, tantamount to efforts to reconcile the ideal and the material aspects of survival, reproduction, and rejuvenation.

In the third century CE, such synthetic accounts abounded. In *Didascalia apostolorum*, for instance, the farewell act of a dying phoenix is to “pray facing the Orient and to set itself aflame and to burn up and to become ash [*et succenditur a se ipso et comburitur et fit cinis*]; from the ashes, a worm emerges [*de cinere autem fit vermis*], and this worm grows, transforming into another perfect phoenix” (5.7.14.10–13). Upon depicting how the dead body of the phoenix catches fire due to a combination of the heat spewed

from its decomposition and “ethereal light from afar,” Lactantius writes that it dissolves into ashes. He continues: “These ashes gather into a pile, as though concentrated by moisture into a mass, and have the effect similar to that of a seed [*quos velut in massam cineres umore coactos conflant; et effectum seminis instar habet*]. Hence, an animal is said to arise, first without limbs, and it is said to be the milky color of a worm. It grows.” (*De ave phoenice* 99–103).

This is not a poetic collage, a ragbag of two traditions, vying for the right to represent the death of the phoenix, but their careful harmonization, balancing the ideality and the materiality of regeneration and, indeed, self-regeneration. Take the body ablaze, an iconic image of matter inflamed by the power of spirit. In the context of the phoenix’s incineration, Lactantius separates the powers of fire—light and heat—apportioning them to an ethereal and distant source of luminosity, on the one hand, and the very near fount of warmth emanating from the corpse, on the other. Fire itself is divided between the ideal and the material worlds, between a disembodied gleam and a heat-producing body that is a decomposing corpse. The division is a necessary precondition for a union of another kind, one where self-combustion is indistinguishable from kindling by the other. The body is no longer a passive substratum receiving the fire of spirit; it participates in the act of ignition.

Lactantius and other authors working at the uneven seams that suture the two traditions have their finger on the pulse of *the spirit of matter* and *the matter of spirit*, which will, a mere century and a half later, fascinate Augustine and instigate his own thinking. Sustainable regeneration is possible nowhere but at this double crossing, which goes far beyond the bid to sew together heterogeneous literary or theological traditions.

Aside from fire, the phoenix is nourished in its rebirth by water, the moisture that lets cinders coagulate into a mass. In effect, mass is a cipher for matter, the materiality of the remains that, losing their recognizable form, are depersonalized, rendered anonymous. Theirs is not matter devoid of spirit: in the anonymity of a mass, a power of generativity “similar to that of a seed” resides. Chaos and the makings of a novel order merge into a single hylomorphic whole.

Preserving the indeterminacy of a seed, which may be the vehicle for vegetal or animal reproduction, Lactantius patiently follows the movement of the phoenix from absolute singularity through anonymous massification to another such singularity. Gradual transitions from a mass of ashes to a seed, a worm without limbs, an egg, and finally a hatchling move at the pace of spirited matter, or, in other words, of materiality imbued with the energies and changing forms of spirit, which it successively gives to itself. Reproductive capacities are not the ideal and idealizing iterations of the same mediated through the genetic code and its transmissions or recombinations; they are dispersed throughout the world, generously allocated to the powers of fire and the sun, moisture and clouds, rotting, a generative mass, a seed. In them, the infinite peers out of the finite otherwise, as the spirit of matter morphing into the matter of spirit, with enough time and patience to undergo a chain of metamorphoses, yet without a guarantee that this chain would not, at some point, break, giving finitude its due.<sup>46</sup>

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