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The Phoenix Complex

A Philosophy of Nature

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8 UNIVERSAL RESURRECTION IN RUSSIAN COSMISM

Russian philosopher Nikolai Fedorovich Fedorov (1829–1903) was ardently committed to the task of universal resurrection. So much so that a contemporary commentator states that this was “the one idea” Fedorov had, being “a thinker with one vast idea,” which was itself replete with multiple ramifications.¹ Heidegger once noted that all genuine thinkers think one momentous thought throughout their lifetime, that “to think is to confine yourself to a single thought that one day stands still like a star in the world’s sky.”² On this view, rather than a philosopher with a limited scope of interests and concerns, Fedorov is a genuine thinker. But merely thinking the thought of universal resurrection, or even positing it as a desideratum for “mature” humanity, is not sufficient—above all, for Fedorov himself. Impatient with the rift between theory and practice, the Russian philosopher advocated the reorientation of all human endeavors (and especially of scientific and technological undertakings) toward the task of achieving immortality for everyone, whether currently living or long dead.

With an unwavering dedication to the task of universal resurrection, Fedorov was a proponent of what, in this book, I have been calling *the phoenix complex*. Yet, he demonstrates a fair degree of ambivalence with regard to the actual figure and symbolism of the phoenix. There are only three instances in which Fedorov mentions the phoenix, and all three are to be found in a long essay on *sobor*, which, more than *cathedral*, means gathering into a community that is the living body of Christ (*sobornost*).

The first reference to the mythic bird in the essay on *sobor* presents itself in the context of the depictions of phoenixes and peacocks in the

catacombs that served as burial sites for early Christians and, later on, as the foundations for churches. They are, without a doubt, the symbols of resurrection, but what catches Fedorov's attention is the artistic medium of their depiction, designated with the Russian word *zhivopis'* (drawing, or, literally, life-writing) that, though it is "often deemed a kind of learning for the unlearned," is just as often difficult to interpret for the learned, as well.³ The subject of drawing is written into life, reinscribed back into the fold of vitality, and so, on a very formal level, resurrected. It is necessary to read the symbol in order to receive the writing of life itself that it contains and then to act upon it so that the writing passes from representation to actuality. Notable here is the fact that Fedorov associates himself with the unlearned not only in the long subtitle of his programmatic text, "The Question of Brotherhood," which is presented as "notes from the uneducated to the educated," but also in his lifelong position that has earned him the nickname "the Socrates of Moscow." The implication is that it is easier for the uneducated to engage with the realm of *zhivopis'*, to read life-writing and resurrect the senses it alludes to (*prima facie* vision, though not only), than it is for those who possess formal academic degrees and credentials, something that Fedorov himself eschewed.

The second reference to the phoenix follows on the heels of the first and is highly ironic. To help viewers read the life-writing of the catacombs, Fedorov fantasizes about chimeras: "If these symbols of resurrection (i.e., the phoenix and the peacock) were given human faces, then, despite the monstrosity of such depictions, the sense of the symbols they point toward would have been clarified."⁴ It would have been possible then to interpret the symbols of resurrection in an entirely human key, as an aspiration to restore the lives of those buried in the tombs that bear the images. But why a human face? Is this narrow interpretation justifiable within the framework of Christianity and of Fedorov's own thought? The efforts to bring about a truly universal resurrection cannot be circumscribed to the human species alone. The phoenix as a figuration of nature, the season of rebirth that is the spring, and Fedorov's proposals to restore kinship among humans as well as between human and nonhuman natures are indicative of how precipitous and indefensible the anthropomorphized chimera would be.

The third and final reference to the phoenix in the essay on *sobor* is at once more complex and more critical of the bird's symbolism. Contemplating Paul Chenavard's commissioned decorations of the Parisian Pantheon, Fedorov writes, "Opposite the upper part, depicting the light of creation, we see a fire below, the burial pyre, into which geniuses throw the last corpses. Yet, this funereal pyre of the world is not the end; it expresses not despair but unreasonable hope placed into fire (instead of rational labor), since out of the flames a phoenix will arise, the son of its own ashes. And this phoenix will meet the same end; therefore, here we do not have the answer, but the repetition of the same question."⁵

In retrospect, my persistent critique of the phoenix complex partly echoes Fedorov: the hope that the world would revive from the ashes, time and again, is pernicious to the point of being lethal. Fedorov, however, is happy to substitute for fire's (currently) uncontrollable and irrational force the joint activity of labor that would seek the ways and means for resurrecting the dead. What equally irks the Russian thinker is the recurrence of the phoenix's death and rebirth that, instead of solving the problem of mortality once and for all, engages in an endless "repetition of the same question." For Fedorov, it is essential to vanquish the absolute evil of death *as much as* the cyclicity of life and death, which, as a movement, is symptomatic of our subjection to unconscious and automatic natural processes. A victory over death would free life from its bondage to finitude and render nature itself conscious by way of a mature humanity that would learn to "regulate meteorological processes"⁶ and become autotrophic (plantlike in its capacity to procure energy from the sky, from solar power), no longer needing to feed on the remains of the dead.⁷ Fedorov sees in this transformation of nature its transition from a blind and mortiferous force to an enlivening synergetic activity. Before we criticize him for the intensification of Enlightenment hubris, albeit with an unusual Russian Orthodox twist, also echoing some themes in Hindu thought, it is advisable to take a closer look at his conception of nature (*priroda*), without which the "common task" (*obschee delo*) of universal resurrection is impenetrable.

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The Russian word for nature, *priroda*, is close to the Latin *natura*: it means “at-birth” (*pri* = at; *rodit’sya* = to be born). The prefix (*pri*-) should not be overlooked, however, since it names a presence—being in attendance, continually being at the side of something or someone—but a presence that is not static, one that dynamically gives itself anew, without representing itself. Being-at does not happen only once in the event of birth; the prefix suggests the sense of nature as being-at-birthing, in relation to which the incremental (evolutionary) or the more abrupt (catastrophic/revolutionary) developments in natural history are derivative. The grammatical root *-rod-*, with which this prefix is articulated, is also semantically rich: in addition to forming the verb “to be born” (*rodit’sya*), it is featured in “sex” or “kind” (*rod*), “kin” (*rodnya*, *rodstvo*), “relatives” (*rodstvenniki*), “kindred being” (*rodstvennost*), “parents” (*roditeli*), and “genealogy” (*rodoslovnaya*).

All of the above are significations that are important to Fedorov. It is in this respect that we should examine the full title of his major work, “The Question of Brotherhood, or Kinship [*rodstve*]; the Reasons for the Unbrotherly, Non-Kindred [*nerodstvennogo*], i.e., Non-Peaceful Condition of the World; and the Means of Reestablishing Kinship [*rodstva*]—A Note from the Unlearned to the Learned, the Spiritual and the Secular, Believers and Unbelievers.” Already the title homes in on the question of kinship beyond its limited human reach; it bemoans the “non-kindred [*nerodstrennoe*] . . . condition of the world,” which, in one way or another, involves all of nature (*priroda*). In the non-kindred condition, nature is (already or yet) not itself. Fedorov confirms this reading in his text, where he defines “the agrarian question” as “firstly, the question of the non-kindred relations among people [*o nerodstvennom otnoshenii lyudei mezhdu soboy*], who have forgotten, due to ignorance, their kinship [*svoyo rodstvo*], and, secondly, the question of non-kindred relation of nature toward people [*o nerodstvennom otnoshenii prirody k lyudyam*], that is, of non-kindred being [*o nerodstvennosti*], which is felt if not exclusively then predominantly in villages that bear directly the brunt of this blind force; in turn, city-dwellers, who are far from nature [*daleko ot prirody*], may think that they are living the same life as it [nature] does for this very reason.”⁸

Non-kindred being (*nerodstvennost'*) is the negation of nature (*priroda*), which is subsequently reduced to a conjunction of blind forces, both within and outside the human domain. The reestablishment of kinship is akin to the Platonic *anamnesis*, remembering, or, more accurately, unforgetting the family ties binding us to each other and to the nonhuman world. For Fedorov, *anamnesis* cannot be a purely theoretical or imaginative exercise; it must have the practical component that lends it actuality. Universal resurrection is the necessary practical component for “the relation . . . of the descendant to the ancestor, which entails not only knowledge but also feeling and which is not limited to thought or representation, demands vision, a personal relation, being face-to-face; that is why kindred-being [*rodstvennost'*] as a criterion requires resurrection.”⁹ Impersonal transactions, with which civil society and civilization replace kinship,¹⁰ deface the sphere of relationality as a whole, making it anonymous. The effacement of nature as our kin is a corollary of this defacement.

Since, carefully avoiding the fashionable discourse of alienation, Fedorov aligns non-kindred relations among humans with those between human beings and the rest of the natural world, the overcoming of divisions would have to apply to both spheres. In other words, the universality of resurrection would need to encompass, beyond humankind (*chelovecheskiy rod*), all those to whom we feel kinship (*rodstvennost'*), including all of nature (*priroda*). Fedorov stops short of taking his argument to its logical conclusion though. He writes, “A consequence of the loss of feeling is non-kindred being [*nerodstvennost'*], that is to say, both the forgetting of the fathers and the lack of unity among the sons. (In its causes, non-kindred being embraces the whole nature, too [*nerodstvennost' obnimaet i vsyu prirodu*], as a blind force not directed by reason.) . . . on the other hand, the fullness of feeling is the unification of all the living (sons) . . . for the purpose of resurrecting all the dead (fathers), the gathering (*sobor*) of all who have been revived, or the unification of the born for the resurrection of those who have been deadened, deadened by birth and nourishment.”¹¹ Just as “non-kindred being embraces the whole of nature,” so kindred being would have to embrace the whole, in the first instance, at the level of feeling, rather than of reason guiding

nature from its unconscious to conscious state. Actually, “the fullness of feeling,” which Fedorov cites has a much wider scope than he is willing to admit: “The gathering of all who have been revived” does not emphasize any uniquely human characteristics, but reproductive and nutritive activities, harkening back to the Aristotelian vegetative soul, shared by all organisms and responsible, at the same time, for the life-process and for the demise of each living being.

The theoretical and practical sense of nature as kin (*rodstvo s prirodoy*) is yet to be achieved in Fedorov’s writings as well. In his critique of philosophy in general Fedorov is aware of the hard work such an achievement requires. In the essay on “Philosophy as the Expression of Non-Kindred Being and Kinship [*Filosofiya kak vyrazhenie nerodstvennosti i rodstvo*],” he states that the discipline “does not even acknowledge the question about the reasons of the non-kindred relation of nature toward us [*nerodstvennogo otnosheniya prirody k nam*]”¹² and pithily defines philosophy itself as “the science treating kindred and non-kindred being [*o rodstve i nerodstvennosti*], presented in a non-kindred form [*v nerodstvennoy forme*].”¹³ Having led thought away from the relations of kin that are discernible in the mythic genealogies of creation or in the Trinitarian figure of divinity, philosophy still deals with the same relations of a second order, depersonalized, abstracted into likeness and unlikeness, sameness and difference, belonging and nonbelonging. Philosophy of nature thus intensifies the contradictions inherent in general theoretical philosophy: in the same “non-kindred [*nerodstvennaya*] form,” it occupies itself with nature (*priroda*), in which we ought to recognize our kin, as the opposite—non-kin, a foreign element, the other vis-à-vis the human. In the twenty-first century, the thinking that has gone the furthest in restoring kindred being and form to the philosophy of nature is that of Donna Haraway.¹⁴

The practical sense of nature as kin is, following Fedorov, to be sought in the practice of resurrection, which, despite its theological provenance, fills with scientific content the technologies of salvation nestled in the phoenix complex. While Fedorov pursues his project of the universal resurrection of humankind, in “The Parents and the Resurrectors” he resorts to a language that admits a much vaster array of beings into the fold of revival. “The

hypothesis of the recreation of the world,” he argues there, “necessitates a shared experience [*trebuet opyta obschego*], embracing the entire globe of the earth in all its strata.”¹⁵ A shared experience is the outcome of discharging the common task (*obschee delo*) that is not only biological but also geological, atmospheric, and ultimately cosmic; in addition to humanity, the whole world is re-created via universal resurrection.

Fedorov’s hands-on vision of the technologies of salvation, well ahead of nineteenth-century European science, underwrites the global scope of the task, which is far from species-specific. “The science of infinitesimal molecular movements . . . will search for the molecules that used to be part of the creatures, who gave us life. [The process will] unfold under the influence of the rays of light that will no longer be blind, like thermal rays; they will not be coldly indifferent. Chemical rays will be able to make choices, to discern, i.e., under their influence, kindred particles [*srodnoe*] will be reunited, while the foreign elements will be distanced.”¹⁶ Later on, Fedorov will compare the process of vegetal growth and that of the regrowth or return of a bygone life: “The process, through which mold or vegetal forms were produced *unconsciously*, will, *with consciousness*, become the aggregator of particles into living bodies, to which these particles belonged.”¹⁷

There is no reason to limit the consciously directed synthesis of particles to human forms alone; in the soil, organic matter derived from dead plants and animals will have been mixed. Further, “the creatures who gave us life” are not limited to our parents, grandparents, and all the other human ancestors. If nourishment is added to reproduction as the two animating vectors of the life process (something that has been done ever since Aristotle and that continues in Fedorov, who aims to reshape both of these vectors beyond recognition), then the plants and animals who served as food for generations upon generations of humans, as well as the putrefied and decomposed organic matter in which plants have grown, are to be included in the debt that can be repaid only by means of resurrection. Fedorov, however, considers that we owe this debt to no one but our human predecessors. “At present,” he notes, “we live on account of our ancestors, drawing food and clothing from their remains,” calling such survival “a hidden cannibalism.”¹⁸ This may be true at the level of culture, with new productions cannibalizing on

the old ones, but not at the level of organic life, in which human biomass is a drop in the ocean compared to that of other animals and, even more so, plants. So, drawing the radical lesson of a truly universal (i.e., not indexed to a single species) resurrection from Fedorov, we could visualize nature as a phoenix, reborn never to die again.

The above poses another problem: What will plants grow in, after all the compost on earth has been revived, receiving its vegetal, animal, and human forms back? That human and, perhaps, animal natality would be fixed at zero once the task of universal resurrection is accomplished is a logical conclusion of Fedorov's thought experiment, at the end of which the sex drive (reductively) serving reproductive purposes is finally quelled, becoming superfluous. But plant growth, vegetal life, is inseparable either from a perpetual birthing of itself or from the substratum of death and decay, from which it draws one of its sources of energy. More than a marginal issue associated with vegetal vitality, this is a blind spot in Fedorov's overall thinking, which is resistant to the double movement of change, namely metabolism and metamorphosis. For Fedorov, resurrection has sense on the condition that the deceased will return in the same form, will have the same look as they had when they were alive, making the vis-à-vis with the living descendants possible. Needless to say, each individual drastically changes throughout their lifetime, so that it is unclear what that desired look of the resurrected would be like. The same as the moment before death? That of a newborn regenerated from what we would now call recovered DNA materials? Who would be raising these ancestral children? Their descendants, which is to say, all of us, united by the common task? How contemporary would the resurrecting and the resurrected be, given the gaps of individual and historical development and maturation?

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The configuration of the phoenix complex in Fedorov's thought is as idiosyncratic as his philosophy itself: he intensifies certain aspects of the complex, while watering others down. For example, Fedorov rejects both old age and decay. "To follow nature [*sledovat' prirode*]," he notes, "means to participate in the natural-sexual struggle for mating, to wage a struggle for

survival and to accept all the consequences of this struggle, i.e., old age and death, bowing down to and serving a blind force. Old age is the fall, and the old age of Christianity will arrive if the evangelical message does not lead to the unification of humanity in the common task; the old age of humanity, the extinction and old age of the world, is its end.”¹⁹ Fedorov shares his distaste for aging with the phoenix complex, but, by snubbing the reproductive logic of replacing the aging individual with a younger copy, he disactivates the complex’s mechanism, its mechanics and machinations. In the system of coordinates determined by universal resurrection, the one who is reborn is not a replacement, not a substitute, for the deceased: the debt of resurrection “demands the return of the identical, not of the similar [*trebuet vozvrashcheniya tozhdvestvennogo, a ne podobnogo*].”²⁰ These words have an ethical ring to them, which is missing in the phoenix complex. Whereas the phoenix is identical to itself across the flaming gap of its death, the immediate combination of sameness and otherness in classical accounts of its demise and rebirth powers the reproductive mechanics of replacement ever since Diotima’s teaching. The ethical tenor of Fedorov’s repudiation of these mechanics has to do with the irreplaceability of the deceased, of everyone who has ever lived and died.

Disgust with decay is another sentiment Fedorov shares with the phoenix complex, the sentiment that is purged from the accounts of the phoenix’s rebirth through slow metamorphoses and instances of spontaneous generation out of rotting flesh. With an unmistakably Platonic ring to his words, the Russian thinker concludes, “Resurrection is also a duty, given that storage is impossible. To store or to keep [*hranit*] is to consign to decay; every stoppage is a fall; stagnation is destruction.”²¹ Stoppage joins old age as a condition of the fall, of fallenness into the material order of things, dictated by “blind” nature, where it is a moment of transition toward death and nonbeing. Sounding suspiciously like a champion of progress, the ideology he frequently chided for its immature outlook, Fedorov (who is the keeper par excellence: an excellent librarian, a proponent of living museums and of an amalgamated necropolis-acropolis) nonetheless rehashes Diotima’s line of thinking, according to which finite beings cannot keep themselves forever the same as they are and must let go of themselves in order to recover

themselves in the other. Remarkably, the Russian verb *hʹranitʹ* (to store, to keep) is nearly identical to *hʹoronitʹ* (to bury), with both alluding to the Greek word for time (*chronos*), itself derived from the verb *chronizō* (to tarry, linger, delay). Finite, time is a delay of the end, postponing the final moment, keeping it at bay for a while; to store and to bury (*hʹranitʹ* and *hʹoronitʹ*) is to hand the buried and the stored to *chronos*, to time and its signature activity of delaying and detaining, even in the course of decay. Fedorov’s allergy to decay is the other side of the coin of his impatience with finitude and with time itself.

That said, in the essay “On the Question of Time [*K voprosu o vremeni, kogda dolzhno sovershitʹsya voskreshenie*],” Fedorov leans toward a gradual transition that is closer to the alternative versions of the phoenix narrative than to the dominant account of the bird’s miraculous rebirth. The essay begins with these lines: “Concerning the question of time, in which the ‘task of resurrection’ may be accomplished, we should say, first of all, that it cannot be accomplished in an *indivisible instant* [*nerazdelʹnyiy mig*]—that what is necessary is a *succession* [*posledovatelʹnostʹ*], which may attain *rather high speeds*, in contrast to the blind pace and unconscious development of the world.”²² Fedorov thus recovers time both in the Kantian sense of a succession and as a tarrying along, the postponement of and noncoincidence with the end. But this is just the initial state or stage of the gradual accomplishment of universal resurrection, which accelerates with every increase in technoscientific capacity. The time of resurrection ultimately strives to zero, emulating the model of hegemonic phoenix narratives.

The universality of resurrection, mirrored in the common task of humanity working together to bring it about, faithfully corresponds to the singularity and uniqueness of the phoenix. With reference to the time required to discharge this task, Fedorov pictures humanity as a single actor, restoring its own past life. Here, planetary time becomes the time of a united humanity, capable of regulating its own rhythms: “When humankind [*rod chelovecheskiy*], as one son of man [*syn chelovecheskiy*], acts upon the earth as a single whole, making earthly time its own action, it will be capable of slowing down and accelerating time’s movement, whether diurnal or annual, based on the oscillations of the axis, lengthening one season and shortening

another, as well as the year itself.”²³ The regulation of planetary time is more intimately connected to the self-regulation of the human phoenix, of humanity as a phoenix, than is the space-based climatic regulation, which Fedorov envisions elsewhere.²⁴ The actions of a singular-universal humanity are synchronized with the singular-universal earth (“acted upon . . . as a single whole”), the universality of resurrection spilling over the boundaries of the human species. But what exactly does the phoenix-like singularity and uniqueness of humanity look like in Fedorov? Is it in agreement with the Jewish fantasy of the cosmic Adam or the Platonic idea of *makro anthrōpos* (the Great Human)?

We can distinguish three main axes in the unitary being of humanity as Fedorov sees it. The first is temporal: “its complete makeup, the gathering of all generations [*v polnom svojom sostave, v sovokupnosti pokoleniy*].”²⁵ The second is spatial: inhabiting the earth and extraterrestrial worlds as “one creature [*vseedinoe suschestvo*].”²⁶ The third is categorial: the individual and the collective, the one and the many, are not subjugated to one another but given free expression through each other. The categorial axis spells out the highest meaning of kinship (*rodstvo*) for Fedorov: “Only in the teaching of kinship is the question of the crowd and personality resolved: unity does not swallow up [*edinstvo ne poglaschaet*], but aggrandizes each unit [*kazhduyu edinitsu*], while the difference of personalities only strengthens unity.”²⁷

The point at which all three axes intersect (the origin of the coordinate system they constitute) is the Trinitarian notion of God, who is both one and not-one, who is a “clan God” (*rodovoy Bog*),²⁸ the God of kinship. The creation of humanity in divine image is not an external given, but a mission to be carried out in a conscious realization of kinship as unity in multiplicity and multiplicity in unity. It is within the context of the Trinity, and despite the ambiguities of the phoenix’s sex (or sexlessness) and even species belonging, that the generationality of the mythic creature is comprehended in Christian theology as a father–son relation and, moreover, as a relation, in which the phoenix is his own son and his own father. With fire and other elements mediating between the generations of the phoenix, the third participant enters the relation, precisely as the substantiation of its very relationality, the participant analogous to the Holy Spirit in Trinitarian theology. It

completes what Fedorov refers to as “the Trinity of agreement and the Trinity of revivification [*Troitsa soglasiya i Troitsa ozhivleniya*].”²⁹

By dint of his shorthand reference to “fathers and sons,” Fedorov’s critics have read him “as the most patriarchal of Russian thinkers” and as “an authoritarian.”³⁰ To the extent that Fedorov exhibits patriarchal tendencies, his thought is aligned with the dominant version of the story of the phoenix, in which fire and other solar accoutrements of the bird are the elemental symbols of masculinity, of the phallus and its erection. But the sweeping nature of the accusation is hardly justified. Fedorov would not have been able to insist on the universality of resurrection were he to have limited it to the sons and not to the daughters; as a matter of fact, he argues that the “Triune God” (*Bog Triedinnyi*) is “the deification of the inseparability of sons and daughters from fathers and their non-fusion with the latter.”³¹ This is the cornerstone of *vsemirnost’* (the whole-worldness, which should not be conflated with globality) of the project that renders concrete its sense of universality. Nor are the mothers left out of the picture: “The matriarchal and patriarchal conditions [of society and civilization] are already a restauration, albeit not yet complete.”³²

More than that, “the relation of sons and daughters, or, more generally of progeny (which is dual [*dvoystvennoe*], consisting of sons and daughters) toward parents, fathers and mothers (who represent for children one, rather than two principles [*sostavlyayushchim dlya detey odno, a ne dva nachala*]) must replace all other relationships, and cannot be limited to remembrance alone.”³³ The dual nature of the progeny does not match, according to Fedorov, the sexed division among the parents, because, *pace* Freud, sexuality is absent from filial ties. The merging of two principles into one, with the addition of asexual being of filial relations somehow exempt from the dynamics of the fall, strongly resonates with the phoenix narratives, where sexual differences and the very difference between sexual and asexual modes of reproduction are blurry, backgrounded, or both. The universality of the common task exacts the grouping of all ancestors in “one principle,” a single cause of the descendants’ existence, without sacrificing the bonds of filial love between this cause and its effects. (Filial duty, we might recall, is an important motivating factor in those accounts of the phoenix, where

the hatchling who encounters the predecessor's dead body in the nest must travel far away—typically, to Heliopolis—in order to give the parent proper burial rites.) In this way, Fedorov imagines himself writing an obituary of sexuality, which would become antiquated, a relic of our animal past, with the realization of universal resurrection, also because there would no longer be a need in conceiving and giving birth to new human beings: “The sexual feeling and birth [*polovoe chuvstvo i rozhdenie*] amount but to a temporary condition, a remnant of animal condition, which will be destroyed when the ancestral task becomes that of resurrection.”³⁴ (A Platonic question can be raised in this respect: Would cultural productions also cease, given that they are the other way, on a par with biological reproduction, for mortal human beings to participate in immortality?)

As for the universality of resurrection in Fedorov, it is a singular universality, recalling the phoenix as a synecdoche of the whole of nature. Of course, Fedorov restricts this universality to humankind, because it is only for the human that death is a problem, in the face of which, regardless of all technical or technological progress, our understanding is resourceless: “We are perplexed before the phenomenon of death, and our perplexity continues to this day.”³⁵ The organic connection between understanding and action, between theory and practice, in Fedorov means that we cannot really act on that which we do not understand, or, in a more positive key, that we can only act on life (and on its restoration), which is what we do understand. The phoenix complex as a whole reflects this failure of understanding death, of accepting and honoring it, which is why, even in the shape of a more or less brief interval between lives, death still appears as a higher vitality (fire, generative rotting, etc.). Within the mass of humankind, though, aspirations to “a privileged immortality [*privilegirovannoye bessmertie*]” are “disgusting,”³⁶ a sign of “the greatest egoism.”³⁷ Rather than single out some humans who would be more worthy of resurrection than others, the singularity in question spotlights the personal affective ties (above all, of filial-parental love), out of which kinship is universally forged: universal in and through the singular.

The motif of fire is relatively rare in Fedorov, but when it appears, it sparkles with allusions to the phoenix. For instance: “The universal resurrection

is not just artistic creation out of stone, on a canvas, etc.; it is not the unconscious birth either, but a recreation out of us, as fire out of fire [*vosproizvedenie iz nas, kak ogon' ot ognya*], with the mediation of everything that is in the sky and on earth, of all the past generations.”³⁸ The project of universal resurrection neither works on foreign materials, as a sculptor does on stone, nor does it enable the reproduction of our own flesh, guided by instinct. Neither artistic nor purely natural (and both at once), it is symbolized by the element of fire, the fire of life devolved from the future to the past generations. The fiery medium of the phoenix’s rebirth could be produced internally (say, from the warmth of the decomposing body of the bird), externally (from lightning striking its nest), or from the interaction of the two (as in the case of the phoenix’s wings rapidly beating the nest). The fire of resurrection, dispensing life back to the dead, arises in this space of an overlap between the internal and external, between the common task of humankind and “everything that is in the sky and on earth.” The whole universe participates in and is transformed by the fulfillment of this task, since mediation is already participation. Nature (*priroda*) itself is reborn (*pererozhdaetsya*)—not as a metaphysical ideal but as kinship (*rodstvo*) realized.

The flame of universal resurrection does not burn out as it should according to the laws of thermodynamics, of force (*sila*), which “is heat, the energy of heat, the force of expansion and detachment . . . which is why life could appear only in gradual burning out or extinction, in gradual deadening.”³⁹ The fire that doesn’t burn forth into the future, but back into the past, so to speak, reverses not only the chronology of thermic exhaustion but also, and by the same token, the expansive and dissociative dynamics of energy: it concentrates, contracts into a unity, interrelating the resurrecting and the resurrected. The cosmic dimension of Fedorov’s vision goes against the inevitability of the Big Bang and the subsequent entropy of an expanding universe it gives rise to. Instead, Fedorov implicitly postulates a notion of energy that increases in the measure in which it is actualized, restoring life and rebinding the intergenerational and interpersonal ties of humankind (the rebinding of the ties is the deepest sense of religion as an act of *religare*). It is for this reason that the Russian thinker can say that “the very representation of the

elements was untrue in the past, and it is insufficient and underthought in the present.”⁴⁰

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As Boris Groys notes in the introduction to the anthology of Russian cosmism, this philosophical strand “does not contain a unified or comprehensive doctrine. Rather, it has to do with a circle of authors from the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries, for whom the visible cosmos became the sole habitat for humanity.”⁴¹ One of the most interesting among its strands is anarchic biocosmism, associated with Aleksandr Svyatogor (Agienko, 1886–1937, who wrote both in Russian and in his native Ukrainian), Aleksandr Yaroslavsky, and brothers Aba and Wolf Gordin.

Fiery imagery permeates Svyatogor’s poetic writings and manifestoes during World War I and the revolutionary period in Russian history. In his 1917 booklet *The Rooster of the Revolution*, Svyatogor advances the poetic and intellectual movement of volcanism, calling for the planetary-scale practice of “the highest culture,” bent on “creating a new landscape and a new sky [*sozdat’ novyi rel’yef zemli i novoe nebo*].”⁴² Nature in its entirety, including the atmosphere, is to be reshaped by the power of fire that, breaking out from the molten core of the planet, renews the aging upper crusts of the earth. Although he does not explicitly refer to the phoenix, but rather to the rooster who signals the dawn of a new day, Svyatogor alludes to the solar bird who completes from above the work that volcanism initiates from below: “At dawn the rooster screams: / A volcanic day is starting. / The sun is in its daring nakedness / And its mighty flaring. / The sun is a celestial Faraway-giant [*Solntse—nebnyi Dalekan*]. / It flies, falling unto the earth, / So as to burn through earthly hardness / In the holiest of combustions.”⁴³ Further, the volcanic day is not a twenty-four-hour period but a duration similar to the Great Year, measuring the phoenix’s lifetime. “Learn to count . . . / By millennia, as God used to do it,”⁴⁴ Svyatogor appeals to his readers in the hopes of inaugurating, or of going back to, the time and space of cosmic existence.

The theme of millennial catastrophes and renewals returns in Svyatogor's later writings, such as the 1924 essay, "The Holy Cycle of Millennia [*Svyaschennyi krugovorot tysyacheletiy*]," where the author finds himself in agreement with the Biblical hypothesis that worldwide upheavals are repeated with the frequency of a thousand years. After such upheavals, "a new Millennial Day" dawns in history, signaling the periodic renewal of humanity.⁴⁵ The cycles of death and rebirth confer the status of a phoenix on humankind, even as they exceed human history and ultimately involve the cosmic environs of life.

Already Svyatogor's volcanism envisions the fresh (and fiery: "*v svojom ognennom detstve*") childhood of humanity in a cosmic age, when "cosmic infinity would serve them [the volcanic giants of new humanity] as a child's playground" and when, "having conquered death, they would knead with their own hands, like sculptors knead clay, the spirit and matter of the world, so as to create an absolutely new cosmos [*vozdvignut' sovershenno novyyi kosmos*]." ⁴⁶ If we look closely, we will see an image of Plato's cosmic phoenix, or the phoenix as cosmos, redoubled in Schelling's *Weltalter* (the ages of the world), flash by our eyes in these lines. The chronology of phoenix's life, whether referring to the history of humanity or natural history, is a revolutionary timeline, both in the sense of abrupt changes and cataclysms, rather than incremental evolutionary development, and in the sense of a rotation, in which the end is followed by a new beginning. (Not by accident, the text where Svyatogor makes this point is titled "Volcanorevolution [*Vulkanrevolyutsiya*].") The cycles of destruction and creation, of the phoenix burning itself to ash and rising again, thus represent a victory over finite time and limited space, the victory that "will reunite us with cosmic life, with cosmic art."⁴⁷

Similar to the idea of a permanent revolution, human participation in cosmic life involves the desire and the capacity to exist in and with fire, to lead what ancient Greeks called *purobios*, seeing that the cosmos *is* this very everlasting fire (*pur aeizōon*), kindling and extinguishing "in measures," as Heraclitus has it.⁴⁸ In contrast to the dominant version of the myth of the phoenix, where fire reduces the aged body to ash and offers a glimpse of a higher life, biocosmism demands the seemingly impossible: living on in the fiery medium. That is why Svyatogor craves speaking in "a fiery tongue

[*govorit' ognennym yazykom*], which, emerging out of the depths of spirit, licks the blue of the atmosphere, burns the moons, cuts the tails of comets, and threatens the final frontiers of the world.”⁴⁹

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Whenever Svyatogor approaches the work of Fedorov, he stresses the features of his own biocosmism that distinguish it from the “uncritical doctrine of the fathers.”⁵⁰ Besides the patriarchal and Russian Orthodox influences that Svyatogor passionately rejects, what he most objects to in Fedorov’s cosmism in a lengthy footnote to his essay “‘The Doctrine of the Fathers’ and Anarcho-Biocosmism [*Doktrina otsov’ i anarhizm-biokosmizm*]” is the “mechanical restoration [*mehānicheskoe vosstanovlenie*],” as opposed to a “creative transformation [*tvorcheskoe preobrazhenie*],” of the dead.⁵¹ At bottom, the complaint against Fedorov rehashes the Hegelian critique of the phoenix as a purely natural repetition, in which nothing changes, that is, in which, after another cycle, nature is complete and everything is restored in a figure, which is identical to the past. Nevertheless, since its Socratic utilization in his (or, better, Diotima’s) rendition of the phoenix complex, *mechane* has stood for much more than mechanics; the means that it names has gathered into itself the procedures, methods, and machinations of substitution—above all, those of self-substitution and of the substitution of the nonsubstitutable. Certain elements of “creative transformation” reside in “mechanical restoration,” however concealed they might be. This indwelling of the creative in the mechanical and of transformation in restoration explains the mind-boggling (for Svyatogor, in the first instance) and “hopeless balancing act between Russian Orthodoxy and atomism”⁵² in Fedorov’s thought.

“Creative transformation,” for its part, carries a very specific meaning for Svyatogor. It is true that Fedorov’s notion of individual resurrection contains insistence on the recovery of dead human beings in their old living forms—the insistence that is, simultaneously, resistance to metabolism and metamorphosis. The assumed unity and uniqueness of the phoenix that each human is to become do not challenge the limits of bourgeois individuality, and this “narrowing down of the personality principle is a fundamental error of the doctrines of anarchism.”⁵³ Positing “the instinct of immortality

[*instinkt bessmertiya*]” as the basis of “the living human personality,”⁵⁴ Svyatogor radically undermines the equation of personality and identity, because the immortal is not the eternal, not that which is forever the same or self-identical, but, on the contrary, the other, the ever-altering, metamorphosing, and metabolizing. Succinctly put, “We have always discussed individuality in terms of a great dynamism. We have not talked of an identity, but of werewolfism and bestialism.”⁵⁵

Svyatogor presents us with yet another path, moving through the phoenix complex, represented by “the instinct of immortality,” beyond it. The property relations upended by the Russian revolution cannot help but affect the revolution in spirit that he wishes for a mature biocosmism. What is the sense of “my” body and “my” mind in a communist society that is neither national nor international, but interplanetary in scope? How can one preserve the relations that are essential to private property (not to mention, the first appropriation of oneself, of one’s body and mind) in such a society? And in which ways is a dynamic individuality constituted in biocosmism?

It has not escaped Svyatogor’s commentators that his version of biological immortality is predicated on bodily transformations, or even “bodily deviations,” such as bestialism and anabiosis.⁵⁶ What is curious, though, is that Svyatogor interprets individual and social life (the Greek *bios*, also at the root of biocosmism) through the lens of biological life (the Greek *zōē*). This interpretation gives traction to the idea of the dynamic individuality that persists in immortality, rid of private property relations and freed from the strict limits of an identity, as when Svyatogor writes that “human being is not a proprietor, but the capacity to become other—to get on all fours, to bark and croak.”⁵⁷ Here, our author is in complete agreement with the Aristotle of *The Poetics*, for whom the defining feature of the human is our mimetic capacity: the human is the animal most capable of imitating all other animals. This, too, is the gist of Svyatogor’s early poem, where the first strophe reads, “Who am I?—A werewolf. / My spirit lives within five dimensions. / On a weekday and on Saturday / I go through rows of transformations.”⁵⁸

In his poetry and prose alike, Svyatogor creates a short circuit, bypassing the humanist notion of the human, between the bestialism of biocosmic existence and the technological achievements that make it practically possible.

In a Nietzschean vein, he contends that “the thirst for personal immortality is a beastly and hot love of oneself. . . . It is the speed of a bird, passing over into the speed of a spaceship engine. . . . One ought to learn the absolute sense of smell from a dog, instinct from insects, hedonism from a lizard, a victory over the dark forces from a rooster.”⁵⁹ The same short circuit passes between animality and divinity: “That is why we refer to the human as to an animal . . . and to an animal as to a human and even as to a god.”⁶⁰ The unanswered question in both of these short circuits is, Can the “thirst for personal immortality” manifest itself in animality, unless one supposes that the animal craving immortality is conscious of death? Recalling the distinction between eternity and immortality, we might say that animals are like gods because they are eternal—not deathless, but unperturbed by the problem of death as such. And, vice versa, only a human can experience the thirst for immortality, especially that of personality, broadly conceived.

Svyatogor’s phoenix combines in itself cosmic and psychic dimensions, a little like the ensouled creature (*zōon empsuchon*) in Plato’s *Timaeus*, albeit a creature in whom biological life (*zōē*) passes over into individual and social existence (*bios*). (It is, by the way, this passage of one type of vitality into the other that allows Svyatogor to learn from animals and to accept their deification, to the point of stating that “types of animals are higher than human types [*tipy zver’ya vyshhe tipov chelovecheskiĭ*].”⁶¹) The nonpossessive, nonproprietary personality that aspires toward immortality finds itself at home in cosmos as a whole. This, finally, is the meaning of biocosmism, “a new ideology, the cornerstone of which is the notion of personality, growing in its power and creativity up to its self-affirmation in immortality and in the cosmos.”⁶²

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The group that Svyatogor established in Moscow in the 1920s bore a revealing name, “The Creatorium of Biocosmists [*Kreatoriy biokosmistov*].”⁶³ Reflecting on this name, Svyatogor writes, “We have already established The Creatorium of Biocosmists. To the ignorant, *creatorium* sounds like *crematorium*—and they are probably right to come to this conclusion. Indeed, we need to burn quite a lot, if not everything. After all, biocosmism

commences a completely new era.”⁶⁴ The cleansing and sacrificial power of fire retains its relevance for Svyatogor, as does its capacity to reinitiate life, transitioning between the end of an old age and the beginning of the new. The phoenix complex is easily recognizable in this flaming regeneration of humanity and of cosmos itself in acts of creation that are indefatigably foreshadowed by acts of cremation.

Among things to be burnt in the biocosmist Creatorium was not only the oppressive past and the present but also the future of the Futurists and of all the utopian projects that deferred, often indefinitely, the achievements on which biocosmism insisted in its revolutionary *now*. As early as the volcanist manifestoes, Svyatogor pitted volcanism against “temporism,” announcing that “for volcanism, freedom is higher than time. . . . Freedom and time are eternal enemies.”⁶⁵ A conceptual allergy to time is the telltale sign of the phoenix complex, and it is quite pronounced in biocosmist thought. The varied forms this allergy takes are worth attending to; in addition to fleshing out the biocosmist worldview, they shed light on finer issues associated with temporality in the phoenix complex.

The first stratum of protest against time has to do with an individual life hemmed in on two sides with birth and death. The finite time of human existence is seen as a curse, in that “fear for one’s life gives rise to cowardliness.”⁶⁶ In the second stratum, which partly coincides with the first, the temporal and spatial limits of individual and communal life introduce divisions within and between communities, among those currently living, as well as between the living and those long dead on the one hand and those yet unborn on the other. “This localism in time (death),” notes Svyatogor, “is the permanent basis for the spiritual and material decomposition of personality and society.”⁶⁷ The revolutionary impulsion of volcanism and biocosmism is directed primarily against the conservatism of “the facts of life and history,” and, in more philosophical terms, against the facticity of finite existence. In the third stratum of critique, time as such is imagined as a cage containing the modalities of the past, the present, and the future as its grid, modalities that are represented by the intellectual and aesthetic movements of perfectism, presentism, and futurism: “But time is not a kindly mother, who liberates

her children from her womb. Time is a skeletal freak, letting her babies fester in her belly.”⁶⁸

Svyatogor’s prescriptions for liberation from the yoke of time differ depending on the stratum one opposes. Individual life is extended beyond “natural” temporal limits by means of the technically realized dream of immortality and resurrection, which is, according to Svyatogor’s modification of Fedorov’s doctrine, not restoration but a creative transformation. Localism in time and space is countered via cosmic existence, whereby one becomes “a citizen of the cosmos” capable of interplanetary travels.⁶⁹ In each of these cases, the emphasis is on destroying the (biological, geographic, historical) limits that convert every finite determination into a prison-house of the infinite. With the battle against time itself, something changes, however: when Svyatogor states that “freedom and time are eternal enemies,” he makes the pronouncement no longer from within the imploding or exploding temporal limits but from the metaphysical standpoint of eternity—*sub specie aeternitatis*, as Spinoza would say. Cosmic time is not exempt from an all-encompassing struggle against temporality, dissolved into the infinity of space. That is to say, Svyatogor uses a mixed arsenal of immortality and eternity to achieve the suppression of time characteristic of the phoenix complex, “to spit in the face of time [*plyunut’ v litso vremeni*].”⁷⁰

Another obligatory component of the complex ever-present in Svyatogor’s writings is the disgust with (and the fear of) decay. In the poem “The Committees of Immortality [*Bessmert’ya komitety*],” the author is unable to accept the “stupid” situation, in which “I live and create—and, all of a sudden, I am a stinky corpse.” He continues: “When death drives me into a grave, / The palms of my hands, my heart and lips, / As well as my brain, where wings are daringly flapping, / Will be gulped down by a hoard of horrible worms.”⁷¹ The conundrum is a paradox of spirit confined to the world of matter, which, nonetheless, has its own mode of deathlessness at the scale of atoms. For Svyatogor, as also for the rest of cosmists, the impersonal immortality congruent with matter is insufficient; the very relation between spirit and matter would have to be transfigured in the achievement of an immortal but “dynamic” individuality, alongside “an absolutely new cosmos.”

Given the cosmists' distaste for decay, what sort of dynamism do they propose? Svyatogor, to be sure, jumps headlong into a series of metamorphoses, distinguishing his thought from that of Fedorov, but they remain sterile without the power of decomposition. As he conveys in a poem, "On an early June morning / I will become a clairvoyant oriole, / And at noon I will pass over the plains / As a menacing cloud. / In the evening, I will settle among the willows / And sing there as a magpie; / I will be suspended in the night sky as a waning moon, / And teach you a melancholy prayer."⁷² If Svyatogor's elemental and animal metamorphoses exclude vegetation, which persists as a mere backdrop setting and habitat, that is because the capacities for growth and decay are highly concentrated in plants. The metabolic half of transformations is where rotting and decay with all their fetidness are operative, but Svyatogor entrusts metabolism to fire that reduces matter to a bare minimum and speeds up—to the point of obviating—the processes of putrefaction. The phoenix complex is particularly apparent in the wedge he drives between the two aspects of becoming, which is dematerialized in the evanescence of decay.

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