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The Phoenix Complex

A Philosophy of Nature

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AFTERWORD

ASHES TO ASHES . . .

“The Cult of the Phoenix,” a rather cryptic short story by Jorge Luis Borges, begins with the following lines: “Those who write that the cult of the Phoenix had its origin in Heliopolis, and claim that it derives from the religious restoration that followed the death of the reformer Amenhotep IV, cite the writings of Herodotus and Tacitus and the inscriptions on Egyptian monuments, but they are unaware, perhaps willfully unaware, that the cult’s designation as ‘the cult of the Phoenix’ can be traced back no farther than to Hrabanus Maurus and that the earliest sources (the *Saturnalia*, say, or Flavius Josephus) speak only of ‘the People of the Practice’ or ‘the People of the Secret.’”¹

In fact, in his magnum opus *De universo* (8.6; *PL* 111.246a-b), the eighth-century Benedictine monk and theologian Hrabanus Maurus lists the phoenix as part of a bestiary, which, in no way pertaining to a *cult*, is but an encyclopedic compendium of different species of animals. What he includes there is limited to a repetition of earlier descriptions of the marvelous bird that is “in the whole world singular and unique [*quod sit in toto orbe singularis et unica*],” that “is called ‘phoenix’ by the Arabs [*nam Arabes phoenicem vocant*],” and that “when it feels the approach of old age, collects aromatic twigs to construct a nest for itself and, having caught a ray of the sun in its wings, voluntarily sets itself on fire [*voluntarium sibi incendium nutrit*] only to rise from the ashes afterwards.” It turns out that Hrabanus Maurus reiterates the words, precisely, of Herodotus and Tacitus and many, many other classical authors transfixed by the phoenix.

Everything, then, begins with a repetition—the repetition of the story of the phoenix and of nature, of the cult (or culture) of the phoenix, of its birth and death. Beginning with repetition, every birth is a rebirth, a renaissance, or a resurrection. Death, too, is redeath. The one who, or that which, is “singular and unique” is replicated, reduplicated, rehearsed at the beginning and in the end, at both its ends. It is and is not “singular and unique.” Is this rehearsal the practice that lends “the People of the Practice” their name in Borges’s narrative, one that turns out to be synonymous with “the cult of the Phoenix”? What do its members practice? Rebirth and redeath? Is this hypothesis really so far-fetched in light of the sexual innuendos on the subject of the cult scattered throughout Borges’s short text?

The phoenix complex absorbs repetition in its own content and in its dynamic form. From the very depths of our unconscious, it reassures us that repetition will keep repeating itself, that the combined chamber of the present and the past it creates will reverberate with echoes of the future. (Borges again: “It is odd that the Secret [of the Phoenix, MM] did not die out long ago; but in spite of the world’s vicissitudes, in spite of wars and exoduses, it does, in its full awesomeness, come to all the faithful. Someone has even dared to claim that by now it is instinctive.”²) This reassurance motivates us to live and it prevents us from living; it lulls us into a near certainty that finitude—our own and that of the world—is inexhaustible, its *no more* mutating into *still more* (of the same). It motivates us to live on the condition that we would not cherish nor so much as pay attention to the finite in its finitude.

The mechanics and the machinations of the phoenix complex convert finite beings into mere shells for the invaluable molten kernel of infinity, of infinite replicability that overflows them, their reproductive potential, their energies, pleasures, or knowledges rushing outward and into the future in a steady stream. Finite existence thus appears under the aspect of nonidentity, its noncoincidence with itself. Since, untamable and uncontainable, infinity bursts out of the finite, there is no need to exert any force in order to extract this kernel, as, say, in the case of natural gas, coal, or petroleum stored beneath the surface of the earth. If anything, the infinite, welling over the edges of the finite, is taken to be a sign of communion with the divine, of the

limited way in which mortals can participate in immortality. Despite—or thanks to—its free outpouring, the overflow is harnessed to the perpetuation of what is extraneous to the finite beings themselves. It matters little if exteriority refers to the infinity they are striving toward or the economic, political, or metaphysical systems they are a part of; truth be told, the conflation of diverse things that occupy the placeholder of exteriority is advantageous for systems that tie their own fate to the infinite or the immortal. (I harbor no illusions: the same mechanics and machinations also apply to my works, including the book you are now reading.)

An antidote to this pernicious perspective is for the finite to be appreciated in its finitude, that is to say, for nature, the world, the beings populating it, and being itself to be affirmed and valued as nonrenewable. The change of perspective, as theoretical as it is practical, does not spell out a return to the strict confines of identities, beyond which it would be impossible to venture. To some extent, this gesture repeats a certain program Jean-Luc Nancy has outlined in the collection *Finite Thinking*, where what he terms “finite thinking” is “not a thinking of relativity, which implies the Absolute, but a thinking of *absolute finitude*: absolutely detached from all infinite and senseless completion or achievement. [It is] not a thinking of limitation, which implies the unlimitedness of a beyond, but a thinking of the limit as that on which, infinitely finite, existence arises, and to which it is exposed.”³

With the help of absolute finitude (or else, finite finitude, albeit without apocalyptic or eschatological connotations: the apocalyptic brooding about the end and the damnation of everyone and everything in existence often betrays *the end of a particular mode of thinking incapable of imagining the existence and viability of other such modes*) it might be possible to put the phoenix complex to rest, to untie its bonds and double or triple binds. It might be possible, finally, to get a sense of singularity, beyond that intimated by the “singular and unique” phoenix, in the finite being that corresponds to a finite thinking, “not a thinking of the abyss and of nothingness,” in the continuation of Nancy’s line of thought, “but a thinking of the un-grounding of being: of this ‘being,’ the only one, whose *existence* exhausts all its substance and all its possibility.”⁴ I cannot think of a stronger way of putting it: “This ‘being’ . . . whose *existence* exhausts all its possibility.” It is the existence that

exhausts all the possibility of a being that makes this being unique, “the only one,” or, in a negative vein, nonrenewable. A uniqueness the phoenix and its associated complex could not have dreamt of.

How to conceive of nature in the light of absolute finitude, nonrenewable existence, and exhausted or exhaustible possibility? Such a nature would be one in which birth would not be overshadowed by rebirth in a mechanic (and a broken, to boot) cycle promising infinite repetition. Only then will each birth, each being that is born (*nato*) and is, therefore, natural, be an event, a gift, a unique instance of grace free from a productive or reproductive necessity. The notion of nature as grace dovetails with the Hindu sense of *mokṣa* or *mukti* signaling liberation from the cycles of redeath and rebirth on the wheel of *saṃsāra*. But it also bears saying that the concept of nonrenewable nature, free of the nonidentity that the phoenix complex confers on it—indeed, the concept of nature *as* nonrenewability and the nonrenewable destiny of nature’s conceptualization—this concept becomes possible, in its multiple senses, against the horizon of historico-environmental nonrenewability, expressed in the currently ongoing sixth mass extinction, the depletion of fossil sources of energy, ocean acidification, the intensifying droughts and forest fires, the impoverishment and erosion of topsoils around the world, deforestation and desertification.

In light of objections to renewability, it is worthwhile to take a moment to consider what this word, rarely (if ever) treated as a concept, actually means. In fact, renewability is a highly condensed form of the phoenix complex, through which the old is rendered new *again*: renewed or renovated, rejuvenated or reinvigorated. Above all, it is supposed to contain the possibility of potentially infinite reinvigorations in a future, indefinitely repeating the past (as *re-*, “again” is a very specific mode of connecting the future to the past). Renewability is replaceability that overcomes time constraints, that substitutes for an aging, an old, or a dying being a new version of that being, *as though* old age and death had no effect. It is, more than the replacement of one being with another, the replacement of this being—“the only one,” as Nancy has it—with the possibility of this being, inexhaustible in the existence of particular beings.

Renewability also adapts the phoenix complex to the logic of resources, insofar as whatever or whoever is renewable is restocked without any glitches or delays, the storehouse of nature continually filled with fresh supplies of the same. The possibility that seduces us in the phoenix complex is not even existential; it is not ensconced in the finitude of actual existence but unfastened from the finite as finite and made fit for ledgers that, besides keeping track of the current stockpiles (of raw materials, energy resources, and so forth), prognosticate their steady abundance. Renewability bets on the reproducibility of life as the foundation for the replaceability of the living. Conversely, finitude implies, far from the secular ideology of the end of times and universal damnation, the possibility of life's reinvention—rather than its reproduction—amid the planetary trauma of extinction. For, doesn't evolutionary evidence suggest that in the aftermath of each mass extinction and catastrophic collapse of biodiversity there has been an equally spectacular resurgence of new life-forms?

Neither fatalism nor nihilism, a philosophy of nature beyond the phoenix complex (including the fast and the slow lanes it allots to rebirth, as well as the discourses and practices of renewability) is the only one adequate to the challenges of the twenty-first century. It commits the body of thought emblazoned with the phoenix to the ground, as *The Book of Common Prayer* stipulates for burial rites—"earthe to earthe, ashes to ashes, dust to dust"—but shorn of the "sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternall lyfe."⁵ This philosophy discovers a nature where birth does not dissolve in the routines of rebirth, where generations are not links in the chain of regeneration, where life emerges in its fragility, in its tenuousness as much as its strange tenacity. Although nonrenewability is not necessarily an empirical feature of life-forms, species, ecosystems, or lines of biological inheritance, it is the limit (not unlike the one invoked by Nancy), from which they receive their sense.

At the limit of nonrenewability, an apt question to raise is how to transform the negative finitude of extinction and the exhaustion of the earth and its resources into the positive finitude of existence. The self-reinvention of life in what Henri Bergson calls "creative evolution" is one aspect of this budding

positivity. In turn, the ethical ramifications of a philosophy of nature rid of the phoenix complex are many, and every single one of them dares respond, in its own fashion, to this question. For example, the “renewable” sources of energy are not a better option than the “nonrenewable” sources not only because, often enough, the former damage the environment more than the latter (as in the case of biodiesel derived through the cultivation of monocultures in recently deforested areas, depletion of the soil, and massive combustion), but also because the certainty of their renewability, projecting the current state into the future, is false. Further, practices that cherish and preserve ecological assemblages should be justified not with respect to “our debt to future generations” but with reference to our debt to those now participating in the creation of these assemblages, including ourselves. Finally, and most importantly, care for the finite in its finitude pays extreme attention not to the potential, which finite being contains, but to what and how it dynamically *is*. Ethical action needs no reasons that exceed its recipient, and least of all does it need to rely on the inner excess of the future, of the recipient’s fecundity or renewability. Practiced beyond the matrix of the phoenix complex, ethics meets the world as it is, refusing to be blinded by the shimmer of the heavenly or earthly world to come; it encounters being on the brink of nonbeing and draws sense from this encounter.

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