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The Rhetorics of Resurrection

Un-earthing the Transhuman

OVERVIEW

FROM I TO WE When I set out to explore and research rhetorical creativity, I wound up facing a series of daunting questions. Can I do it all? Can I save the planet; save humanity; empower local creations; enable difference; end tyranny; save language; *and* welcome the marginalized? Doubtful, right? If anything, the posthuman drift of the last few decades has solidified one critical truism: there is no *I* which is fit to be doing—let alone presuming to save—anything. After all, has not our rhetorical study taught us that the literary and rhetorical subject is doomed to replicate only itself? So, is the future *cum* salvation lost on me? In a word—that word being *me*—yes. But if I ask, on *us*, then maybe not. So, before *I* abandon all hope and embrace despair, I propose that *we* take the hermeneutical advice of Rabbi Ben Bag-Bag who said about his own traditional texts: turn it, turn it, for everything is in it. So, let us turn our question ever so slightly and take a second look at our world, its problems, and apocalyptic possibilities. The question must become: can *we* do it all? Let *us* hope so. But if *we* are going to “give it a go,” then our rhetorical success pivots on the nature of this “we.” Here, I will suggest that this “we” must be resurrected amongst the posthuman ruins of the ego, the subject, and the self.

Today, briefly, I would like to tease out the possibility of a resuscitated agency by challenging the received tradition of transhumanism and pitting it against the proposed benefits of posthumanism. Historically, the transhuman has been understood as a purposefully evolved and/or technologically augmented individual. In contradistinction, I submit that the transhuman is a resurrected—reborn—*we*. I would like to use four broad theoretical strokes to give my central conjecture a rough (and even objectionable) silhouette. The central image I am trying to outline is that the transhuman will be a new kind of human and that this does not require augmentation but only resuscitation. My four broad strokes are as follows. First, I want to postpone my focused analysis and introduce the ideas of the late 19th century cosmist Nikolai Federov. I begin with him so as to lay down a “base coat.” Federov is more than an obscurely interlocutor. Rather, the revolutionary spirit, avant-garde aesthetics, literary debates, and the agricultural crises of Russia’s Silver Age are parallels to our own current American rhetorical milieu. His account of resurrection and kinship sketch the kind of transhumanism I am after. The value of his ideas, specifically for rhetoric, will only become more apparent in contrast to the historical strokes that follow in my analysis.

Second, I want to return to, and touch on, the posthuman focus of contemporary rhetorical studies. Third, I want to highlight the ways in which that posthuman focus overlooks a latent philosophical commitment to death by examining its philosophical underpinnings. And finally, fourth, I want to show how resurrection, and its new human, are proleptically anticipated in that morbidity. I hope to close by simply pointing to the horizon of new rhetorical possibilities with this resurrected transhuman in view.

DISPERSAL AND DEATH

I: NIKOLAI FEDEROV So, let us jump directly to Nikolai Federov so that the forthcoming development of ideas will have proper contrast and clarity. Again, for my purposes, Federov illustrates the kinds of questions rhetorics should be asking of posthumanism. These questions point directly to the problem of subjectivity which is the lifeblood of rhetorical agency and invention.

Federov was a Russian cosmist who lived at the tail end of the 19th century. Like other cosmists, he had an elevated view of material reality and was focused on its survival. For Federov, the perfection of material reality was proportionately related to the effectual nature of, and relationship between, humans. That is, if there was class conflict or large-scale hierarchies that threatened kinship, then the gift of human creativity would drift towards destruction. So, for Federov, if humanity and the world are bound in a reciprocity, and, if they are both going to flourish, then their survival must start in the perfecting of kinship of human communities. What is critical for Federov is that any failure to maintain *sobornicity* (the Russian term for a grand union) would open a *caesura* wherein death would emerge as the transcendental and bounding principle of all of life. So, Federov proposes that the “common” task of all humanity then is to rebel against death and pursue resurrection.

Before I draw out the philosophical implications of his paradigm, I can not overlook the zany, while beautiful, scientific proposals that Federov offers. He suggests that the first step towards union in all things is meteorological. As such, human armies should unite, fire their bombs into the clouds, and prompt rain on barren fields and marginalized people. He also suggests that a fully enveloping global railroad might adjust magnetic conditions on earth and have an effect on weather amongst other things. He considers it the primary human obligation to reanimate dead matter and give it back to those whom it belongs. In addition, he suggests that humans, in resurrecting their fathers and mothers, will extend their reach into the sky where they belong: amongst the gods, immortal. Finally, throughout his primary work, he is adamant that the rupture between peoples and other comic elements divides *thought* and *action*. Humanity is left impotent on the one hand (which he calls infantile) and blindly obedient to nature on the other.

Even in these novel and fanciful examples, his conceptual framework is readily apparent and compelling. For one, resurrection is an act of unity. For Federov, death splinters and can never provide union. Second, resurrection is an act of charitable othering. War and violence disperse and subjugate. He considers this dispersive and divisive instinct

to merely mimic a one dimensional account of nature. That is, to see only it a propensity to death, not to cull out its life through creative engagement. Third, his account is unearthing but not antimaterialist. He wants to preserve all matter by reanimating it. But this requires that we turn towards the sky. Read through the lens of Paul Virilio, to rise to the sky would be to restore a sense of orientation on earth. Without the horizon of the sky, Virilio notes, we hasten towards our own sedentary, and *enearthed*, death. This point is not incidental. To speed towards the earth, like Virilio's skydiver, is to hyper-focus on the ground and its elements, and then watch them scatter and lose relation. Federov's conception of unearthing then is to resist this gravity and rise up towards the sky. This notion is also at the heart of Federov's account of art, creativity and rhetoric.

More specifically, Federov's rhetorical theory lies in apodeictic ceremony and inscription. If death is *enearthing*, as hyperfinitude, then human resistance to death—and their embrace of resurrection—begins in their mourning of this condition. Their mourning turns to ambitious resistance in the tombstone. This original art, he notes, sits perpendicularly to the ground and points to the sky. Again, this is not an escapist religious ideal. It is rather a raising up of death that may enable a perpetual living. In a very direct way, the first rhetoric, for Federov, is the art of resurrection. What is more, this rhetorical art is both the grounds of rediscovering the power of action and subjectivity. But neither action, nor subjectivity, can be hierarchical, solipsistic, or tyrannical. They are reborn in collectivity.

Federov initiates an alternate account of the transhuman. It is not a mechanical humanoid nor an augmented one. A transhuman is one whose subjectivity and rhetorical action are tied to otherness from the beginning, in the end, and after the end. As we part from Federov, his confluence of death, human subjectivity, human relationality, and rhetorical craft need to remain with *us*.

II: THE POSTHUMAN AS A RHETORICAL RESPONSE As I had noted in my proposal for this conference, a surging interest in posthuman ontologies and rhetorics demands that we think about how we will write for, think in, and experience meaning in a world where agency is no longer the province of discreet humans.¹ Put abstractly, does the fading prominence of the human rhetor finalize the death of the human agent altogether? Or, can the human, after its burial, be un-earthed? Now, in light of the above, we can also ask: why the posthuman? What does it offer that the transhuman does not?

These questions pose difficulties because we struggle to exactly identify the posthuman. Fortunately, we can lean on the work of Katherine Hayles, Diane Keeling, and others for a provisional outline. First, Hayles, helps us see why isolating the posthuman is so difficult. Hayles points out that the arrival of the posthuman was less of an onset or break and more of a skeuomorphic transition.² It is always already what we have been (an expanded subjectivity) even before the advent of hyper digital telecommunications. The

¹ Casey Boyle, "Writing and Rhetoric and/as Posthuman Practice," *College English* 78, no. 6 (2016).

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idea of being “other” than simply a localized human subject has been with us for a long time. Hayles suggests that the notable shifts lie in the shape of the new subjectivity. For Hayles, our understanding of the form, location, and modality of the networked subject is facing new questions about the usefulness of the body and the boundaries of agency.³

Rhetoricians have tapped into this new ambiguity and used it as a productive resource. It has been especially instrumental in trying to map the nature of rhetorical invention and agency. Rhetorics has, since the 60s, been wondering how a social agent—literary, verbal, or else—can discover the means of persuasion. In lieu of more recent political exclusion, rhetorical theory has been looking to the posthuman to find a subject who can speak without elevating itself to a position of dictator.⁴ The posthuman promises an agent which is dispersed into networks and distributed in ecologies and thus can avoid centralized demagogic force and violence.

Diane Keeling is one such rhetorician who has recently sketched out the contours of the post-human turn. She confirms that post-humanism explores the fundamental limitations of the self and advocates for this dispersed and distributed account of agency.⁵ Keeling’s work more narrowly focuses on the promising liberties of post-humanity—away from hyper-masculinized forms of subjectivity and other systems of transcendental power.⁶ For my purposes, her work is unique because she directly juxtaposes transhumanism with post-humanism. The former, for her, is a covert permutation of self-focused agency. The latter is a liberation thereof. Keeling’s sketch, which is by no means universal and binding, highlights my point of departure. Her account reaffirms the received narrative that transhumanism is the augmentation of the human body. She reads this as an augmentation intended to retain, or to enhance, centralized subjective control over *the other*. But, as I have intimated, the transhuman needs to be resurrected as the *across*-human; the intersubjective human. The *trans* prefix here is read conjunctively which lies in union, in the open, with another.

Other representative rhetoricians, Boyle, Maldonado and Trapani, and Ulmer, among others, share a common goal with Keeling. They seek a rhetorical agency and practice which is hospitable to difference, generous to otherness, and eschews self-assured sovereignty over any idea. They also desire “actions” which are empowering of/for a community and not an overpowering of/by the self. To fully examine the aims and effects of this post-human turn, we have to sift through its philosophical predilections and then ask whether the emerging concepts are tenable. Here, I turn to those philosophers of selfhood and subjectivity to ask if their accounts undermine their corresponding post-human proposals. More narrowly, I want to show how these abstract philosophies have an embedded pre-commitment to the priority of death as the engine of distribution and dispersal.

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⁵ Marnie Ritchie, “Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Communication,”

⁶ Diane Marie Keeling, “His-Tory of (Future) Progress: Hyper-Masculine Transhumanist Virtuality,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 29, no. 2 (2012).

II: GOD DIES, MAN DIES, THE WORLD DIES It is important to note that a dispersal of subjectivity has historically coincided with some sort of philosophical death. This is immediately evident in the work of G.W. F. Hegel and Martin Heidegger.⁷ For both, death was a totalizing provision for life. In Hegel, death generated dialectical movement as the embrace of the negative. For Heidegger, death was the ultimate horizon of authentic existence—or subjectivity. For Nietzsche, death had an instrumental function in eternal recurrence and also finalized the end of transcendental divinity. Critically, whether it be idealism (Hegel), phenomenology (Heidegger), or proto-existentialism (Nietzsche), death and human subjectivity have been intertwined.

In the 60s, Michel Foucault gave more roots to this genealogy by locating the seeds of subjective death in the work of Immanuel Kant. For Foucault, the “death of man” was the inevitable result of the finite limitations that Kant overlooked. Since the abandonment of divine registers secured the death of God, then the transcendental shape of man would soon follow suit. In the *Order of Things*, Foucault exposes the internal incoherence and conceptual collisions at work in the transcendental self.⁸ For Kant, man was both an empirical object and transcendental subject. For Foucault, these two positions conceptually collide. That collision made it impossible for man to be both the author of the manifest world of phenomena *and* an object within it. So, man, at least the analytically transcendental man of modernity, was dying. For Foucault, much like Hayles, a new account of subjectivity was becoming increasingly important.

While Foucault took the Kantian analytic to task, elsewhere in France, Marx’s economic man was fatally ill. Marx had positioned the subjective center of man in his productivity: *homo faber*. For Marx, man would then be fully human in a community of labour. Or, to frame the same idea in rhetorical terms: man was fully a writer, or a rhetor, when she/he had a teleological agenda; a work. Even though this notion had been important to French social activism, Jean-Luc Nancy, amongst others, critiqued this inherited Marxist assumption by characterizing it as a reintroduction of the same transcendental conditions of Kant, Hegel, et al. That is, a true human community can not be free and true interaction if it is presided over, forced, or mediated by a dominating principle or work. It would need to put this transcendent man, or his work, to death. Interestingly in the interest of subjectivity, death is saved, not man. Maurice Blanchot corroborated Nancy’s insights but revised the function of death by deepening his own commitment to Georges Bataille. Bataille was a philosopher who explicitly elevated death as the chief modality of personal subjectivity and communal freedom. These three, Foucault, Nancy, and Blanchot—like Hegel, Nietzsche and Heidegger before them—illuminate the role of death in the search for posthuman agency/

⁷ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel: The Phenomenology of Spirit* (Cambridge University Press, 2018). See also, Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (SUNY Press, 1996).

⁸ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (Routledge, 2005).

non-agency. However, if we look more closely at their conversations about death, we discover an inchoate resurrection and lived intersubjectivity.

For Georges Bataille, since God was already dead, then all restrictions on life were lifted. Death was not a closure but an opening by which to commune with an unrestrained infinity of excess. In other words, death presses past limits and, as a sacrifice, enables man to find ephemeral freedom, or what Bataille called sovereignty. Nancy and Blanchot extended Bataille's notion that death had some sort of role in freeing a community and its people from any transcendental principle. Like Foucault, the notion of a self was simply untenable, and beyond Foucault, community was also unstable so long as it suffered under the force of a presiding principle. In rhetorical terms, writing *cum* invention is stunted for any self or community which is constrained by any transcendental or centralized notion. Post-humanism rhetorics proposes then to distribute and disperse agency and be scatter it amongst "others." Presumably, those others are what we call the world. Post-humanism hopes that this world is elevated alongside the demise and death of both God and man. But the debate between Nancy and Blanchot, on the purpose and role of death, questions the validity of this agenda. It begs the question: if God died, and man would soon follow, will the world die next?⁹

To see the danger acutely, we must narrow in on Blanchot's account of two kinds of death. On the one hand, death is a traditional death of *things*. It is that Heideggerian horizon; that ultimate limit. A subject, only ever present to itself, can never can encounter such a line. In a sense, a subject can never actually die. According to Blanchot, this first kind of death then would be slipping back towards a kind of transcendental. It would be something that exceeds the subject's freedom and impinges it. So, Blanchot suggests that, on the other hand there may only be *dying*. It is an opening/waiting for that limit which never arrives. Still that impossible limit is a provision for all of living. Critically, then, communities are constructed in a suspended space of share *dying*. For Blanchot there is a individuating value to *dying*. It fragments any of those masses which had been consolidated under transcendent principles and thus restores individuation. But Nancy, in recent publication, questions whether a world of individually dying non-selves can ever be called communal? What do they share? Is there a common? If man, as a central agent, had already died, and god had already died, and everything was dispersed and distributed into ever fragmenting particles, then the most pressing question is: is this the end of the world as we know it? God dies; man dies; the world scatters and dies.

Here, the transhuman resurrection outlined in Federov starts to take on phenomenological shape. Nancy responds to this dismal picture by contorting Blanchot's dying-as-unapproachable-but-necessary horizon and places it *between* people as their rapprochement. In other words, "dying" is a self-emptying that is socially directed. Dying is not the individual freedom poised before an abyss. Rather, *dying* is poised towards the surface, sense, and encounter of another. If Nancy's revision holds then communities are configured in the spacing of dying. In this framework, people *arise* on the surface of this open

⁹ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Inhuman* (Stanford University Press, 1991).

dying-for-others; communities are configured as resurrection. Nancy's account then is one of perpetual rebirth right at the threshold the being-with-others, which is, itself, a space of dying *cum* rising.

So, here at the end of an abstract detour, what have we gained? Three things. We see that death, from Hegel up through Blanchot, had been the key concept in dismantling centralized selves and in constructing posthuman agency. Once again, death is the means of dispersing and distributing subjectivity. Second, we also see that this death, as a conceptual category, can become parasitic and end up killing the very world it establishes. Looking forward, if rhetorics presses on into posthuman proposals unaware of this conceptual unfolding, then it may be fatal to the world. Finally, and most importantly, as Nancy shows, resurrection is prefigured in this death-as-opening. Dying is, in some sense, an "act" we perform for and through those others who, in their differing, are simultaneously the moment of resurrection. These insights ultimately corroborate the picture painted by Federov earlier: the human must reborn in intersubjectivity. In this last stroke, I now turn to examine this intersubjective human more closely.

DISPERSAL AND BIRTH

III: IMMORTAL LIFE Transhuman resurrection, what I have also been calling re/new birth, is best articulated by a French philosopher of gender and love: Luce Irigaray. Irigaray's career has pivoted around the same essential questions of subjectivity that we raise here. One of her chief conclusions has been that masculine subjectivity has defined agency in the modern era as power and subjugation. So, she initiates resistance by rethinking the "sexual difference" and resources it to construct a new, female, kind of subject. Like the thinkers above, she too pronounces a profound relationship between this subjectivity and death. In fact, there reciprocity is only internally necessary for this masculine model of subjectivity. It is only one kind of subjectivity.¹⁰

Within this kind of subjectivity she sides with Blanchot and Nancy before her. In that paradigm, death would be a horizon which always beckons the beyond but cannot permit of such a transcendence. She concurs that this condition would lend to a kind of eternal dying. But, for Irigaray, there is a route to an intersubjectivity defined by horizontal, not vertical, transcendence. It is through the mother.

In her essay on Martin Heidegger, she notes that the material and maternal provisions of all of life get consumed in a kind of enclosed navel-gazing masculinity. These provisions of possibility and creativity get semantically converted into things, words, and objects of control and centralization. The man separates himself from his provisions (mother) but roams endlessly and gives way to these fragmentations. All he has left to offer his giver, his mother, his material beginnings, is death. This model of the subject is suffocated by enclosure. He cannot "breathe," think a relationality, or love. For Irigaray, models of

¹⁰ Luce Irigaray, *The Forgetting of Air in Martin Heidegger* (Burns & Oates, 1999).

posthuman, and post-transcendental, communities of dispersed self-hood cannot plumb the fecundity of life-giving intersubjectivity because they cannot encounter the woman.

Irigaray proposes that a new kind of human be born, or perhaps, reborn.¹¹ This new human is more originary, and more multiple, than any posthuman subjectivity whose dispersed identity is still defined by death or dying. Historically, organizing subjectivity as a singular led to internal incoherence. That incoherence, as we have seen, inevitably led to an exaltation of death as the means of dispersing and distributing subjectivity. But instead of dying, Irigaray pluralizes subjectivity by birthing; birth is already dispersal. Her assertion is remarkably simple: humans are born from two and thus remain plural throughout their subjective lives. To be born in an intersubjective relation is to be fundamentally two from the beginning. Being born as a two, this new human is always *being-with*.¹² It is not trying to negotiate an impossible distance and connection with the other by beginning with the *inconceivable* fact of its own self-presence. For the transhuman, as for the reborn, relation is always already. So, resurrection coincides, if not precedes, incarnation.

The litany of Irigaray's concepts cannot be fully explicated here. But, two of them deserve mention and will bring us full circle back to Federov. The newly reborn, plural, human is both *transcendent* and *immortal* in her own right. Transcendence is not a revelation from above but a constituent posture of being born as two. Like Nancy, the edge of life is not that far and obscure non-limit of *dying*, but is the transcendent register situated at the surface of the neighbor. Anything "outside of the subject," be it around or below or else, is ecstatically experienced as horizontal transcendence. This horizontal transcendence is described as the sharing activity of breathing, which is both maternal metaphor and embodied practice. Immortality is implied by horizontal transcendence. Rather than secured immortality through "my" vertical progeny, as a masculine subjectivity would through genealogy or copyright, I become immortal in the networked relations of love endowed to me upon being born—not being given or emanated. With this picture in mind, the reborn and intersubjective human points us back to Federov's transhumanism and points us forward to ask how rhetorics can, if we still want non-centered rhetorical practices, can participate in resurrection?

A CONVENTIONAL CONCLUSION Here in the end, then, I can walk away abruptly with an embryonic, reborn, idea on the table. One that has been exposed here but not fully expositied. In short, what does this resurrection, intersubjectivity, or commonality mean for rhetorical invention and agency. I am persuaded that our discipline's perennial focus on invention *via* posthumanity has been to seek the living amongst the dead. In turn, I submit that we should start to consider that rhetorical life gestates in the womb of conventions.

¹¹ Luce Irigaray, *To be Born* (Springer, 2017).

¹² Jean-Luc Nancy, *Being Singular Plural* (Stanford University Press, 2000).

Many thanks.