

Nikolai Federov
**The Museum,
Its Meaning and
Mission**

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The museum is the last remnant of the cult of ancestors; it is a special type of that cult, which while being expelled from religion, as we see with Protestants, is reestablished in the form of museums. The only thing higher than the old tatters preserved in museums is the very dust itself, the very remains of the dead; just as the only thing that would be higher than a museum would be a grave, unless the museum itself does not become a transport of ashes to the city, or a transformation of a cemetery into a museum.

Our age deeply reveres progress and its full expression – the exhibition, i.e., the struggle, the extrusion – and of course would wish eternal life for this extrusion, which it calls progress, this perfecting, which will become so perfected as to annihilate that pain which necessarily accompanies this perfecting, as it does all struggle. And our age in no way dares to imagine that progress itself would ever become the achievement of history, and this grave, this museum, becomes the reconstruction of all of progress's victims at the time when struggle will be supplanted by accord, unity in the purpose of reconstruction, only in which parties of progressives and conservatives can be reconciled, parties that have been warring since the beginning of history.

The second contradiction of the contemporary museum is the fact that the age that values only what is useful ends up collecting and preserving what is useless. Museums serve as justification for the nineteenth century; their existence in our iron age demonstrates that conscience has not completely disappeared. Otherwise it is impossible to understand preservation in our crudely utilitarian world where everything is for sale, as it is impossible to understand the high sales value of objects that are useless and outdated. By preserving things despite its exploitative tendencies, our age, in spite of self-contradiction, still serves the unknown God.¹ But will this respect for monuments of the past be preserved during further progress, during an increase in artificial needs, deemed necessary, at the time of intensified concern for the present?

Herodotus, in his Histories, explains that a debtor in ancient Egypt would bury the mummy of his father to his creditor, who was quite willing to make a loan on this basis. Since the mummy was of great religious value to the debtor, he would certainly pay the debt in order to redeem the pledge. Our time, with future progress, can completely abandon everything related to our ancestors, all monuments to them; but at the same time man, having lost the very sense and concept of kinship, already ceases to be a moral being, i.e.,

will attain complete Buddhist impassivity; for him there will be nothing dear, and society will truly become an anthill, which, however, is also capable of “progress”!

However, one cannot annihilate the museum; like a shadow, it accompanies life, like a grave, it is behind all the living. Each man bears a museum within himself, bears it even against his personal wish, as a dead appendage, as a corpse, as reproaches of conscience; for conservation is a basic law, preceding man, having been in force before him. Conservation is a characteristic not only of organic, but of inorganic nature; and especially of human nature. People lived, i.e., ate, drank, judged, decided cases, and put those that were settled into the archives,² not even thinking at the time of death and losses; in reality it turned out that putting matters into the archive and transferring all the remains of life to the museum was a transfer to a higher order, to a domain of investigation, to the hands of descendants, to one or several generations, depending on the position and the state in which the investigation is found, also depending on how widespread this investigation has become. Its highest degree will be attained when those who settle affairs are also their investigators, i.e., make themselves members of the museum, in other words, when investigation becomes self-study and in this way leads to the point at which resurrection immediately follows death. This level is not a court, for everything that is deposited in a museum is there for rehabilitating and redeeming life, not for judging everyone. The museum is the collection of everything outlived, dead, unsuitable for use; but precisely because of this it is the hope of the century, for the existence of a museum shows that there are no finished matters. That is why the museum provides consolation to everyone who is afflicted, because it is the highest level of development for judicial-economic society. For the museum, death itself is not the end but only the beginning; an underground kingdom that was considered hell is even a special department within the museum. For the museum, there is nothing hopeless, “sung out,” i.e., something that is impossible to revive and resurrect. Only those who wish revenge will find no consolation in it, for it is not a power, and containing a reconstructing force within itself, it is powerless to punish – for only life can resurrect, not death, not deprivation of life, not murder! The museum is the highest instantiation that can and must return life, not take it.

The Kremlin, transformed into a museum, is the expression of the whole soul, the completeness and agreement of all capabilities, the absence of internal discord, the expression

of unity, of spiritual peace and happiness, i.e., of all that is lacking in our progressive era; a museum is indeed the “higher world.” When the museum was a temple, i.e., a regulatory force, supporting the life of ancestors (at least in people’s understanding), then will, expressed in this (i.e., in the temple), even if it was an imaginary action, was in agreement with reason that justified it and acknowledged this imaginary action as real. At that time reason too was not separated from memory, and the act of commemoration, nowadays just a ceremony, had a real meaning; at that time memory was not just preservation, but a restoration, even though only imaginary and conceptual, of course, but all the same serving as a real guarantee of preserving the fatherland, the common origin, brotherhood. When reason is separated from the memory of the fathers, it becomes an abstract exploration of causes of phenomena, i.e., philosophy. When not separated from the memory of the departed, it is not the seeking-out of abstract principles, but of fathers; reason, directed in this way, becomes the project of resurrection. Linguistic investigation supports this original unity of capabilities: one and the same root appears in words (of Aryan, or perhaps other languages too) that express memory (moreover, memory specifically of fathers, of the dead) and reason, and soul in general, and finally the human as a whole. Psychological investigation of the positivists also supports the unity of memory and reason, attributing the processes of knowledge to the law of memory, of association, turning will into the regulator of action. And thus we can say that muses and museums were born from memory, i.e., from the whole man. In other words, linguistic as well as psychological investigation convinces us that museums and the muse are contemporary with man himself, they were born together with his consciousness. Consequently, the purpose of the museum can be nothing other than the purpose of the circle dance and the ancestral temple, into which the round dance was transformed, i.e., the sun-path, returning the sun for the summer, awakening life in all that had faded in winter. The difference here is only in the means of action that had no real power in the round dance and temple; the action of a museum must have power that really returns, gives. This will be, when the museum returns to ashes itself and creates tools that regulate the destructive lethal forces of nature that control it.

We would not exaggerate, of course, if we said that the museum, as an expression of the entire soul, will return to us spiritual peace, internal accord, will give us happiness like the father feels upon the return of his prodigal son. The sickness of the age consists exactly in the

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renunciation of the past, the renunciation of a common purpose for all generations. This sickness has deprived our life of meaning and purpose, and in literature has created Fausts, Don Juans, Cains, and generally restive types, while in philosophy it has created subjectivism and solipsism. When there was no discord between capabilities, there was no separation between religion (as the cult of ancestors) and science and art (being celestial and terrestrial, as well as subterranean). As man himself was then a complete, healthy being, there was no separation between the spheres of knowledge and action. There was no fencing off of these spheres from each other, they were not limited to only the present tense, satisfying only animal lust, as is done nowadays, thanks to the separation of these spheres from religion, which is done out of enmity toward the latter. The first sages (not yet philosophers) were astronomers, adherents, probably, of the muse Uranus. They were not only natural experimenters, in the present sense of the word, but also anthropologists and theologians. So “sages” and “astronomers” were equivalent words, and wisdom was in astronomy, which embraced all that is divine and human, celestial and terrestrial, dying and living, and was not just abstract knowledge, but learning and, at the same time, veneration of the father-ancestors. The question of the death of man, of the end or destruction of the world, is a question that is theo- and cosmo-anthropological, or what is the same, a question of astronomy. It could not proceed from idle curiosity, because at that time there were no people yet who lived solely by knowledge of being a library scholar. Neither could this question arise from idle curiosity because knowledge then was not yet separated from action, even imaginary action, the limits of which they did not yet perceive, because they could not yet separate their own action from the action of nature. Ionian sages questioned only the means of action, the reality of mythical actions, which, as it was then considered, transformed heaven into the habitat of the dead, and therefore they searched not only for that element to which everything returns, from which everything arises, but also that force that binds everything together and directs all. However, even contemporary science does not have a right to live for itself, and it must consider itself the means or investigation of the true nature of real action, instead of the mythical, the artistic, but it has no right to consider itself knowledge for knowledge’s sake and to free itself from the obligation to serve a common purpose. Even though such a demand, such an encroachment on the freedom of the individual, would seem shocking to a contemporary man, this comes

from a habit of thinking that the freedom of an individual is absolute, in a century that does not accept anything as absolute. The right to such freedom is only the right to live according to one’s whims, turning life into the trivial and empty, and then in despair asking, “Life, why were you given to me?”

This is why, based on the unity of knowledge and action, astronomy specialists have no right to avoid an obligation to serve, a duty given to man at birth; likewise, all natural-science investigators do not have that right either, whose science is only a split-off from the celestial science, a diversion from the science of the universe. Based on the same principle, the observatory is the same kind of necessary feature of an all-science museum as external senses, the organs of perception, are necessary for every man for his internal feeling and memory. By “observatory” we mean not an agency of abstract science, but of physical astronomy, of a chemical science of every substance, organic and inorganic, vegetable, animal, and human, such that humanity (which can constitute a museum only in its entirety) observes the whole universe from the observatory – from the outside, and observes man himself from the anthropological side. An observatory observes the world that, one might say, is merged with the memory of the dead, of the past. The past is the subject of history. The beginning of the observatory was the gnomon, the invention of which we credit to the Ionian sages. Primordial man probably told time using his own shadow; in later times, in urban life, the gnomon replaced this way of telling time; it was an instrument for measuring one’s actions and one’s life experience; that is why clocks (predominantly hourglasses) became an attribute of death. With the help of the gnomon, man also created a calendar in which he marked off not only the times of nature’s rebirth (holidays) and fading, but also the days of the passing of fathers, i.e., the days of commemorating ancestors. That is why a museum, as a formation of memory of the fathers and of everything that is connected with them and with the past, is inseparable from the observatory.³ Astronomical calendars were thermal, optic, and generally physical and chemical, for the forces of nature – especially the biological, organic force – change according to the time of day and the time of year.

The educational significance of observatories as schools demands that idle gazing be turned into obligatory observation, so that the sky has as many observers as there are stars in it. Platonizing Christianity tried to hold thought “on high,” but to prevent thought from falling “down low,” one must raise one’s eyes to

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the sky, one must turn contemplation into observation.

Thus, the observatory is related to the museum as the external senses (the aggregate of which, i.e., of all means of observation and organs of perception, is actually an observatory) are related to reason, but to reason in the widest, or more accurately, in its actual, real meaning and significance: to reason that cannot be separated from the memory of the fathers, and contains within it one indivisible whole; to such reason that only the son of man possesses, elevated to the state of a criterion for humanity, in mental and moral respects.

The museum, then, unifying the sons of man for the universal investigation of the sky or universe, is related to the observatory not as a depository of mere chronicles and photographic snapshots of the sky and stars and generally of natural-historical observations; for an astronomical observatory there is no past, as there is no past for the movement of the solar system, which is not a past, but a continuous event, revealed by the changing position of the stars, which is why it is necessary for astronomers to remember, to hold, so to speak, within themselves, the positions of the stars, entered in the very earliest of catalogues. Thus, here memory is merged with reason, and the past with the present to such an extent that the death of the observers appears only as a changing of the guards who organize the regulation of the world and, at the very least, open the way for the establishment of control over the world. The powerlessness to establish control has deprived man of the opportunity to hold and restore life. Likewise, there is no past for natural science, as it is itself only a human representation of nature, or (which is the same), a project for controlling it, enacted in the shape of a museum by the whole human race. The museum, thus, is an historical enterprise not only in the sense of knowledge, but of action: as natural science, it is astronomy with the physical sciences contained within it; on the other hand, natural science itself is the same as history, it is the project of control, enacted.

However, a museum with just an observatory, which provides only reconnaissance, still remains an organism without active organs, without hands and feet. Because humanity on the whole is yet incapable not only of action but of movement, unless we accept as such the movement of the earth, happening independently of man. This organism (a museum with an observatory) will remain without hands if the city and the village remain separated, in which case the natural-historical museum will remain outside of the natural process of nature, will not be its reason, those

memories preserved in the museum will not be a true, material resurrection, nor will they be a regulator of nature. It is due to this separation of city and village, and to this concentration of all mental life in the former, that nature seems elusive to us; while we blame nature for hiding from us. Wouldn't it be fair to say that we do not discover it for lack of time, occupied with manufacturing and everything connected with it? Due to our busyness we cannot prepare observers and investigators, because from childhood we enslave them in the factory in order to satisfy our most trivial desires. It is equally unfair to say that nature gives us no way, and having attached us to earth, makes us powerless to establish control. All of these complaints are equally justified, as would be an earlier complaint that nature deprived us of the opportunity to sail across the oceans, until Columbus managed it. And at present, in, for example, photographic images of the sun, we have, one must suppose, everything that we need to grasp the concept of what the sun is, and it is our fault that up to this point we have not used all this available data and have not interpreted it.

Astronomy, once it has reunited with the sciences which have been unnaturally detached and unlawfully separated from it, which have forgotten their origin, like physics and the chemistry of inorganic and organic substances (for there can be a physics and a chemistry of the earth or planets, suns, interplanetary or intersolar spaces, but the only people who can defend the independence and separation of these sciences are those who do not acknowledge the common task of the human race), astronomy will be transformed into astrocontrol, and the human race will become the astronomer-controller, which is its natural vocation.

Not only physics and chemistry and natural sciences in general, but philosophy as well – all have been detached from astronomy. The first philosophers or sages were astronomers, the temple was the first portrayal of the world,⁴ and the earth was considered a foundation and the first element of being. But for a philosopher, who is not a sage, but only an amateur, a virtuoso of wisdom, for a philosopher in the literal sense of the word, earth is no longer a foundation, an element. For Anaximander, for example, it was a meteor and remained immobile as a result of its equal distance from the edges of the universe. Thus the Copernican worldview began to be constructed; the sky was not just the height, but also the depth, it embraced the earth. Theoretically, the search for reason, and practically, the search for a foundation, for support, was the necessary manifestation of a being that assumed an unstable, vertical

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position. The same problem of a foundation relates to the whole earth. If we recall that throughout history there has been the uninterrupted fear of the destructibility of earth, of the end of the world, then it becomes understandable why this question of a foundation, of a reason for the world, has always remained open. What a great shift must have occurred in worldviews when Anaximander, in place of a firm foundation, of a base, or even of a liquid as Thales considered it, left earth at the center without any tangible support, having unified the concept of the bottom with the circumference of the world, unified the concept of the top with the center of the earth; it became necessary to create a whole new physics, a new concept of falling bodies. Anaximenes considered air as the foundation of the world and as its first element, which he considered the soul of the cosmos and of man. Pythagoras had already become the Copernicus of the ancient world, but in this world the triumph was left for Ptolemy's system. However, the Copernican system will not hold in the new worldview, unless it acquires practical value.

The detachment of philosophy from astronomy rendered incomprehensible the very problem of basis, foundation, reason. Philosophy, searching for the meaning of everything, did not know its own origin, its *raison d'être*, and lost the meaning of its existence. The fear of the destruction of the world, doubts about its stability, caused the appearance of a new science of the conditions of earth's stability, its preservation, and its reconstruction from the primary element. Astronomy sought *the indestructible*, from which everything could be reconstructed. But astronomy itself was born from the decline of religion, which always considers itself the possessor of the means for the preservation and reconstruction of the world. In the question of maintenance and reconstruction, physics, chemistry, and philosophy itself became understandable.

Constant discord gave the question of the world and society a primary place, and overshadowed the fundamental, universal question. History, having as its subject the eternal discords, separated into an individual science; but as long as it speaks of man as creator of discord, as long as it looks at the life of the human race as it is now, only as a fact, not asking the question of what it must be, i.e., a project of future life, humanity will not discover either in astronomy, or in cosmic art, or in world regulation, its common purpose.

In order to have internal peace and spiritual accord, without which external peace is impossible, we must not be enemies to our ancestors, but really be their grateful

descendants; it is not sufficient to limit ourselves to only internal commemoration – merely a cult of the dead – it is necessary that all the living, having united as brothers in the temple of ancestors, or the museum, which has as its elements not just the observatory, but also the astronomical regulator, this would transform the blind force of nature into one that is directed by reason. Then the insensible would not prevail, it would not take the life of the sentient, then all that is sentient would be restored, and all worlds would be united in resurrected generations, and an infinite area would open for their conjunctive activity, and this alone would make internal discord unnecessary and impossible.

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Nikolai Federov (1829–1903), a representative of Russian religious philosophy, was one of the founders of Russian cosmism.

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1

Those who fancy seeming fresh call things that go out of use “a rag,” forgetting that if what goes out of use becomes a rag, it’s only because during use, it was already in tatters to begin with. The only thing that will not be in tatters is that which has the power to withstand the transformation into rags and rot, and at the same time also has the ability, i.e., a power arising from the mind, to always restore freshness. Only restoration contains within itself the power to counteract destruction; while progress only provides splendor to decay ...

2

Or the remnants of life, of activity, themselves become the content of museums, for example, like kitchen scraps from prehistoric times that end up in museums.

3

A tower, as the simplest, original observatory, is a necessary, natural accessory of a museum, because the museum is the creation of a being that has assumed the vertical position, turned toward heaven, which hostility and unbrotherhood turned into the position of a guard, a position that is detached from heaven, awaiting attack from one’s neighbors, and asking deliverance from heaven.

4

It is not possible for man to not create resemblances, resemblances are necessary for analyzing the idea and partially for proof; and if a secularized and secularizing church is a museum, then the armillary spheres, the globes (states), were also the beginning of the museum.

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