

The second part explores the issues of reception by treating costume design as a legible poetic language. Informative, engaging and meticulously researched, this is, surely, the strongest section of the book. Some justification is offered for the study's chronological starting point as it mentions the weakening of the Russian state control of visual and performing arts in the 1870s–80s (p. 119). The overall narrative also becomes more spontaneous, more fluid, and effectively more in tune with the playful and carnivalesque subject-matter of the work (as compared to the discourse of the first part, heavily charged with specialized, and at times cumbersome, terminology). Chapter four interprets non-representative costumes (such as 'Dawn', 'Fantasy' or 'Duma') worn at the series of balls hosted by the St Petersburg Academy of Arts, while chapter five 'constructs an imaginative projection of the cultural legacy through the character costumes of mythological and historic figures'. In both chapters insightful parallels are drawn with the writings of Leonid Andreev (*Black Maskers*), Anna Akhmatova and Viacheslav Ivanov, leading (chapter six) to the inquiry into the abstract costume practices in the avant-garde works of Blok, Maiakovskii and Kruchenykh. Seen as an utmost representation of semantic freedom, their works are juxtaposed (chapter seven) to its antithetical manifestation — the use of nudity in theatre and in life.

It is a pity that the works of Boris Christa, a leading scholar of Russian Symbolism and a pioneer in the analysis of vestimentary semiotics, remained outside this otherwise methodically conducted study. By exploring the representation of masquerade in textiles and literary texts, an insightful connection is established between its fictional and social manifestations (scrupulously drawn from memoirs and journalistic accounts). This connection is undoubtedly the hallmark of the work, which not only expands the denotational spectrum of the trope, but highlights an important facet of the modernist aesthetic platform: that of stylizing life as an identity performance, revealed in a variety of its multiple expressions.

*Language Centre*  
*London School of Economics and Political Sciences*

OLGA SOBOLEV

Young, George M. *The Russian Cosmists: The Esoteric Futurism of Nikolai Fedorov and His Followers*. Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York, 2012. x + 280 pp. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$33.95; £19.99.

THIS book takes the reader on a museum-like guided tour of the life and thought of the principal actors of Russian Cosmism, whose Prometheo-Faustian projects include the attainment of immortality, the resurrection of the dead, the colonization of the entire universe and the steering of human evolution towards an ever more asexual and spiritual state. The unacquainted

reader is thus in for a change of scenery, to put it mildly. The Russian Cosmist movement originated with the eccentric and abstemious nineteenth-century Moscow librarian Nikolai Fedorov, for whom our first and foremost task is nothing less than to overcome death. He began with the truism that no one wants to die. All of us, even those who are mortal enemies, are united against a greater common enemy, death (p. 24), and all our problems are ultimately grounded in this overarching problem of death. Every little thing that human beings busy themselves with, however seemingly trifling — from handwriting to female attire — is fundamentally a question of life and death, because it is part of our struggle against our impending disintegration. No solution to any human problem can be final until a solution is found to the problem of death. Once a solution is found, solutions to all other problems will follow (p. 47).

According to Fedorov, therefore, humanity's 'common task' is to find a path to immortality here in this world. Not only should we become immortal ourselves, but we also ought to resuscitate our ancestors. He hypothesizes that dust from the dead is diffused throughout the cosmos. One of our tasks thus consists in collecting these dust-particles and inventing the technology to bring the dead back to life. But, one might ask, where would we put all these living dead? This is where the task of exploring and colonizing the universe comes into play. Eventually, all 'of the cosmos would be colonized by the resurrected ancestors [...]. This would [...] solve the Malthusian problem of an overpopulated Earth' (p. 49). Meanwhile, our sex-drive would become regulated and sexual relations and childbirth would gradually cease. In the future, the 'time and energy that now goes into attracting and holding onto a spouse and to bringing new life into the world will be devoted to restoring life' (p. 90). Moreover, by feeding on organic matter, every generation is thereby partially feeding on particles that were once part of its ancestors — a practice that Fedorov regards as a form of cannibalism. One of our tasks is thus to end this cannibalism by finding ways to absorb nourishment directly from air and sunlight, as plants do (p. 90).

Young divides the Fedorovian Cosmists into 'Religious Cosmists' and 'Scientific Cosmists'. Among the first group, he includes Vladimir Solov'ev, Sergei Bulgakov, Pavel Florenskii and Nikolai Berdiaev. Solov'ev accepts the Fedorovian project but, for him, the 'resurrection of people in the same state in which they strive to devour each other — to resurrect man in a stage of cannibalism — would be both impossible and utterly undesirable. This means that the goal is not the simple resurrection of man in his personal organic structure but the resurrection of man in the form he ought to take' (p. 100). Like Solov'ev, Bulgakov proposes different solutions to some of Fedorov's problems. One of them is his solution to the problem of cannibalism. For Bulgakov, 'everything finds itself in everything else' (p. 111), and this ontological unity is good. Bulgakov therefore conceives that the consumption of particles that were once part of our ancestors is something

positive; it is at once for us a means of ontological communion with the world, and for our ancestors a means of re-embodiment.

Of the religious philosophers, Young has the least to say about Florenskii's Cosmism. The presentation of his life and thought drags for most of the section devoted to him before a truly relevant discussion begins, yet even here the commentary pertaining directly to Cosmism remains disappointingly meagre. One of the relevant passages is the story of Florenskii's contribution to the Soviet project of the electrification of Russia during the 1920s. Young conjectures that Florenskii's involvement in this project, in the capacity of an electrical engineer, reflected his Fedorovian ideals, but — on the basis of what we are told in the book — it could just as well have been unconnected (p. 131). As to Berdiaev, he agrees with Fedorov 'that the time of philosophy as reflection has passed and the time for philosophy as action has come' (p. 137). Like Fedorov, Berdiaev interprets '*Thy kingdom come* not as a promise to be awaited but as something to be created' (p. 138). His main criticism of Fedorov, however, is that his project seems more directed towards 'restoring the past than creating the future' (p. 138).

The 'Scientific Cosmists' included, amongst others, Konstantin Tsiolkovskii, Vladimir Vernadskii, Aleksandr Chizhevskii, Vasilii Kuprevich. Borrowing books from the library where Fedorov worked, Tsiolkovskii was invited to meet him. The erudite librarian then became the mentor of Tsiolkovskii, who would eventually write the mathematical formulae that made possible the launch of Sputnik I in 1957 (p. 149). In turn, Tsiolkovskii went on to mentor Chizhevskii, who hypothesized a correlation between periods of high solar activity (sun storms, sunspot activity, etc.) and periods of high human activity (wars, revolutions, etc.), and tried to determine the exact interval at which these occur so that human activity could be channelled towards positive outcomes. Another important Cosmist is Vernadskii, who taught at the Sorbonne. His students included Teilhard de Chardin and Édouard Le Roy who, according to the author, had probably developed their concepts of 'biosphere' and 'noosphere' while attending his lectures (p. 156). Kuprevich is best known for his studies on aging and immortalism. His main hypothesis is that death is not necessarily inherent to life, but came about as an adaptation facilitating the evolutionary process: the older forms of life had to die for the new and better-adapted ones to replace them. But, since the stage of conscious thought has been attained, death is no longer required as an evolutionary means (p. 172). Human beings already have the partial capacity for indefinite cellular renewal (nails, hair, etc.), so we now have to figure out, through genetics, how to engineer all human cells to keep regenerating indefinitely.

Young briefly presents other, lesser-known twentieth-century Cosmists, such as Aleksandr Bogdanov, Aleksandr Gorskii and Valerian Muraviev. Bogdanov experimented with the hypothesis of rejuvenation through blood transfusion

and eventually died doing transfusion experiments on himself (p. 186). Gorskii defends the Fedorovian idea of ‘chaste marriage’ and argues for the passage from a stage of sexual intercourse to one of mental intercourse. The young, he believed, are currently defined by what they can offer as potential sexual partners, and the old by the quality of their sexual production, i.e., their offspring. Immortality would free people from this state of enslavement to sex (p. 202). Finally, Muraviev thinks that the process of human reproduction should become the task of genetics and should be effected in laboratories. There is no good reason, he claims, why reproduction should require mating; it once occurred by ‘direct division’ and could be achieved again in the same way. The goal of genetics, Muraviev adds, is to ‘create a population of supermen’ (p. 213).

Young’s study offers neither detailed philosophical analysis nor scholarly discussion, but rather gives a straightforward historical overview of the life and thought of the main figures of the Cosmist movement — a laudable enough goal in itself. However ‘kooky’ (p. ix) some of the Cosmist utopias might seem, others are now considered real possibilities among the scientific community, such as the exploration of the universe, or have become outright realities, such as ‘electric illumination for homes’ and ‘magnetic communication devices’ (p. 16). On a critical note, however, the Russian religious philosophers discussed in this book (Solov’ev, Bulgakov, Florenskii and Berdiaev) were not, so to speak, ‘followers’ of Fedorov, but rather thinkers who shared theoretical affinities with him. Even if they were in several cases influenced by some of his ideas, this does not necessarily warrant classifying them as Fedorovian Cosmists. In this respect, the book’s subtitle can be misleading. Nevertheless, as the author has successfully shown, Russian Cosmism had a significant impact on Russian religious philosophy and on Soviet scientific thought. For this reason alone, the movement can hardly be ignored in histories and studies of Russian thought.

*Institut Jean Nicod, Paris*

FREDERIC TREMBLAY

Jangfeldt, Bengt. *Mayakovsky: A Biography*. Translated by Harry Watson. The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL and London, 2014. xi + 610 pp. Illustrations. Bibliography. Index. \$35.00: £24.50.

VLADIMIR MAIAKOVSKII opens his laconic autobiography *I Myself* with the evasive remark, ‘I’m a poet. That’s why I’m interesting’ (PSS, vol. 1, Moscow, 1955, p. 9). Yet the poet’s colourful life — from the notorious yellow blouse to his unorthodox relationship with Lili and Osip Brik — has intrigued readers as much as his poetry. While Bengt Jangfeldt has written extensively on Maiakovskii’s literary output in the past, he turns his attention to the poet’s life in this carefully researched yet highly readable biography. Some textual exegesis is present, but it serves primarily to illuminate the historical