



The concept of creativity in Georges Florovsky's thought

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Abstract

This article discusses the meanings of “creativity”—*tvorchestvo*—as we encounter it in Georges Florovsky’s thought, first and foremost in his magnum opus *Ways of Russian Theology* (1937). *Tvorchestvo* had by this time become a key concept in Russian pre-revolutionary and later émigré thought. It is associated above all with Nikolai Berdyaev’s philosophy, but it also plays an important role in Sergei Bulgakov’s philosophy of economy. In both cases, it stands for the human response to divine creation. Moreover, and somewhat less famously, it was also an epistemological concept in the religious idealism of Vladimir Solovyov as well as in Russian neo-Kantianism (Fyodor Stegun), where it stood for the active, synthetic faculty of our minds. Florovsky, meanwhile, used it as a description of how we should relate to the patristic heritage, but also to history more generally: Our attitude should be “creative,” active, as well as both backward- and forward-looking. This “return to the Fathers” was a central component of Florovsky’s neopatristic program, but, interestingly, in order to conceptualize this return, Florovsky took over a concept from traditions that his own approach otherwise firmly criticized. By analyzing Florovsky’s use of *tvorchestvo*, this article addresses the broader question as to the differences and parallels between the neopatristic movement and the legacy of the Russian Renaissance (Silver Age).

Keywords Florovsky, Georges · Neopatristics · Russian religious Renaissance · Creativity · *Tvorchestvo* · Historical understanding · Conceptual history

A central theme in the study of Georges (Georgy) Florovsky is his relationship to the legacy of the Russian Religious Renaissance, known also as the Silver Age—that is, Russian thought and literature from the late nineteenth century to the Revolution. With regard to Florovsky it is in particular his relationship to Vladimir Solovyov and the subsequent generation of religious idealists (Sergei Bulgakov, Nikolai Berdyaev,

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Pavel Florensky) that is at stake. Florovsky's writings from the 1920s on offer a fundamental critique of that tradition of religious thought in Russia, which he understood as too infused by German idealism, Schelling in particular. However, this does not mean that Florovsky was not influenced by it. Since topics and trends of the Russian Renaissance (Silver Age) were something that he actively responded to, they had a formative impact on the development of his own ideas. As Paul Gavriluk has argued, "Florovsky appropriated many of the guiding themes and questions of the Renaissance, despite the fact that his answers often clashed with those given by his older Russian contemporaries" (Gavriluk 2014, pp. 3–4).¹

This article contributes to the discussion about Florovsky and the legacy of the Russian Renaissance by focusing on one particular concept: *creativity*; in Russian *tvorchestvo*. It figures quite extensively in Florovsky's magnum opus *Ways of Russian Theology* (Florovsky 1937), in particular in the final chapter, where Florovsky outlines his neopatristic program for a "return to the Fathers," that is, to the Greek Church Fathers of the Orthodox and Byzantine tradition. By implication, Florovsky appropriated a concept that occupied a central role in the thought of many Renaissance thinkers, whom he otherwise severely criticized and whose impact he sought to delimit, even erase, or so it seems at times, in the field of Orthodox theology. To purify Russian Orthodox thought from idealism was, arguably, something that he attempted to do, even by means of concepts with a strong idealist flavor. In fact, a notion of creativity does not play any significant role in the Orthodox theological tradition before its encounter with Western modernity, which—in the case of Russia—means first and foremost the Russian Schellingianism of the Slavophiles (Riasanovsky 1955).² "Creativity" is in any case a modern concept (Reckwitz 2017). This raises the question as to why Florovsky used this concept within the framework of his neopatristic synthesis, and this article seeks to answer this question, on the basis of an analysis of the ways in which he speaks of creativity in *Ways of Russian Theology*.

Creativity as a contested concept of the Renaissance

As noted, "creativity"—*tvorchestvo*—was a central idea among several of those Renaissance thinkers whom Florovsky criticized so extensively for, among other things, their deviation from the proper Orthodox tradition of the Church Fathers. The philosopher of creativity *par excellence* was Nikolai Berdyaev, whose main philosophical work, according to himself as well as most of his interpreters, was *The Meaning of Creativity* of 1916 (Berdyaev 1989). Berdyaev regarded human creativity as the human response to God's creation, an approach that invested human activity with a religious meaning regardless of the intention of the human creator (artist, philosopher etc.). For Berdyaev, human creativity is, *per se*, religious. Furthermore,

¹ Paul Gavriluk's book (2014) explores in detail Florovsky's relationship to Renaissance thinkers. In general, since polemics with Sergei Bulgakov in particular were so constitutive of Florovsky's own argument, his relationship to the Russian Renaissance / Silver Age is, I would claim, directly or indirectly an issue in a majority of the studies of his work. See for instance Gallaher (2011).

² Somewhat paradoxically, Florovsky was particularly positive of the Russian Schellingian thinker Aleksei Khomyakov for having accomplished a "return to the Fathers" (Mjør 2011, 190).

the concept plays a central role in Sergei Bulgakov's early sophiology, above all in his *Philosophy of Economy* of 1912 (Bulgakov 1993, 2000), where creativity is connected to the human reworking on and engagement with creation (nature). Bulgakov's approach was highly influenced by Schelling, whereas Berdyaev drew significantly on German mystic traditions, in particular Jacob Böhme.³

Berdyaev and Bulgakov's approaches can be described as metaphysical, since they raised the question as to what creativity really is and answered it by connecting it to the foundation of the world and to the human contribution to the making of reality. However, one of their main inspirations, Vladimir Solovyov, had previously written about creativity too, but from a different angle. He approached it as an epistemological issue. For him creativity referred to the highest synthesizing faculty of our minds (Solovyov 1990, pp. 717–734). Although Solovyov gave no references on this point to other thinkers resonating along similar lines, we encounter a similar conception in the German psychologist Wilhelm Wundt (1832–1920). For Wundt, human apperception was a “creative synthesis.” This new type of psychology was deeply influenced by the epistemology of neo-Kantianism, in which valuations played the decisive role (Ringer 1969, pp. 311–313; Krieger 2006, pp. 69–70). In fact, it was Solovyov who wrote the entry on Wundt for the Brockhaus and Efron encyclopedia (Solovyov 1892). In general, there existed a variety of models and conceptualizations in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century intellectual history that aimed to capture the organizing, synthesizing faculty of the mind, and “creativity” was one of them. This included also the Russian neo-Kantian Fyodor Stepun, who used *tvorchestvo* as an equivalent to *Gestaltung*, that is as a mental construction proceeding from “experience” (*perezhivanie*). Stepun's model drew on both symbolism and neo-Kantian epistemology, and it comprised both the “creation” of the mind in terms of synthesizing apprehension and cultural forms: art, religion, science, philosophy, and more (Stepun 2000, pp. 89–126, see also Melikh 2014, pp. 196–206).⁴

Outside what is normally regarded as the Russian Religious Renaissance, “creativity” was also an aesthetic concept. In the Russian context, it had been developed by romanticist theoreticians, such as Nadezhdin and Belinsky (Mjør 2018), and later it figured prominently in Russian modernism—symbolism in particular—informing its “theurgic” notions of human artistic creation.⁵ These conceptions, as well as certain Nietzschean ideas which were immensely influential on Russian modernism, resonated with Berdyaev.⁶ Creativity was thus not just a key problem in Russian religious thought but in Russian modernism more generally. Though not all of these contexts are equally important to Florovsky, it implies that the ubiquity of “creativity” in his theological writings provides them with an undeniably modernist flavor.

³I return to Bulgakov and Berdyaev as well as Solovyov in the final part of this article.

⁴*Gestaltung* and not *Kreativität* or *Schöpfung* is how *tvorchestvo* is rendered in the German-language biography of Stepun by Christian Hufen, who discerns in Stepun's turn to this very concept the attempt to combine Neo-Kantian epistemology and theory of culture with the mystical and vitalist ideas of Russian symbolism and religious thought (Hufen 2001, 60), a reading that is very much in line with that of Melikh.

⁵Key studies include Paperno and Grossman (1994); Krieger (2006); Bychkov (2007), Grigor'eva et al. (2012).

⁶The literature on “Nietzsche in Russia” is extensive, see for instance Grillaert (2008).

And yet Florovsky's use of *tvorchestvo* differs, not unexpectedly, from how we encounter it among other Renaissance thinkers and modernist artists. By actively using this very word, Florovsky enters the debate as to what genuine creativity really is. He offers some corrections while displaying his indebtedness to his opponents. Through his use of it, "creativity" becomes an "essentially contested concept" in W.B. Gallie's sense, that is, a concept that "inevitably involves endless disputes" about its use by its users (Gallie 1955, 169). Concepts typically become contested when different meanings compete on the background of larger philosophical or political agendas. As I will try to show, Florovsky's use becomes an example of such contestation. And yet there are also some interesting parallels between his notion of creativity and that of his antagonists, which in particular relate to the epistemological understanding of creativity. As my reading will suggest, the concept of creativity is connected to key issues in Florovsky's thought, such as his idea of history and of historical understanding.

Creativity according to Florovsky: originality and tragedy

In *Ways of Russian Theology*, Florovsky in many places uses *tvorchestvo* in accordance with the seemingly neutral, modern meaning it has in Russian, that is, as "work," "output" or "that which is created," without any strong evaluation or philosophical and theological meaning attached to it. Examples include his characterization of "Scriabin's *tvorchestvo*" as penetrated by "sharp eroticism" or Merezhkovsky's as representing the fin de siècle shift from literature to religion. Solovyov's *tvorchestvo* presents us with the "motifs of active magism," whereas a "religious-naturalistic temptation" was characteristic of Rozanov's worldview and *tvorchestvo* (Florovsky 1937, 456, 459, 465, 487).⁷ In cases like these, the concept does not appear to have any significant meaning beyond the mere descriptive, a name for what they did and left behind. While we easily recognize a negative evaluation typical of Florovsky's attitude to the Russian Religious Renaissance and modernism in these examples, the usages here do not seem to contain any deeper philosophical or theological meaning.

On the other hand, it is also obvious that not any kind of output is *tvorchestvo*, and this brings me to the more significant occurrences of the concept in *Ways of Russian Theology*. Here, I propose to distinguish between three types.

First, Florovsky uses "creative"/"creatively" in opposition to mere imitation. In the opening of the concluding chapter "Breaks and Links," Florovsky proclaims that "In the course of Russia's development, influences have predominated over independent creativity" (Florovsky 1937, 500; Florovsky 2019, pp. 159–160). A significant proportion of the occurrences of *tvorchestvo* and *tvorcheskii* throughout the book is

⁷In this article, references are made to the first Russian edition of *Ways of Russian Theology* (Florovsky 1937) and published English translations (Florovsky 1979, 2019). When no reference to an English translation is given, the translation is my own. For references to the final chapter of *Ways of Russian Theology*, which is a key source to my discussion here, I have used the recent translation by Alexis Klimoff (Florovsky 2019, 159–183).

of this kind. The opposition here seems to be that of strong influence versus originality and independence, which we furthermore can describe as a typically classic romantic opposition. Yet in Florovsky's thought, there is a particular ring to this opposition, where influence is negatively associated with the West, whereas independence is connected to the rediscovery of one's true self, which for him, and in the history he relates, means a return to the Orthodox heritage, the Church Fathers—despite the fact that patristics had never been a solid tradition along the ways of Russian theology. The call for the “return” to something that never was is one of the great paradoxes in Florovsky's thought.

It is therefore a question whether “imitation versus creativity” in Florovsky necessarily means “imitation versus originality.” That is, whether it means originality in a modern, romantic and post-romantic sense. The modern understanding of “creativity” has its clear roots in the aesthetics of romanticism (Reckwitz 2017, p. 4, pp. 33–56).⁸ Florovsky's frame of reference, we would expect, is a different one, and this brings us back to the question what the “return to the Fathers” as a “creative turn” really implies.

In any case, by opposing *tvorchestvo* to imitation, Florovsky clearly makes an evaluation. Quite tellingly, in *The Ways of Russian Theology*, words such as *tvorchestvo* and *tvorcheskii* hardly occur in the chapters dealing with the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, whereas a new wave of creativity—a “creative yes” (Florovsky 1937, p. 231; Florovsky 1979, p. 267)—characterizes, according to Florovsky, the nineteenth century. The Russian, or actually Ukrainian, Baroque was for Florovsky a non-creative epoch; it represented Western “captivity.” “Russian theology” was torn away from its roots on Ukrainian soil.⁹ The nineteenth century, by contrast, Florovsky describes as a very promising one. And yet, according to Florovsky's overall evaluation of that age, “Russian ‘self-awareness’ did not amount to and did not follow creativity” (Florovsky 1937, p. 288). In the conclusion to Chapter Six of *Ways of Russian Theology*, Florovsky writes that the nineteenth century saw “attempts at creative acquisition (*tvorcheskoe osvoenie*)” (Florovsky 1937, p. 330), a formulation that combines romantic and anti-romantic perspectives. It calls for a non-imitative acquisition of the past, an aim that in my view at least partially characterizes Florovsky's understanding of what creativity should be.

Thus, the nineteenth century in Florovsky's account is a century full of promising tendencies, above all towards a liberation from Western “captivity.” In the end, however, the attempts to liberate fail, according to the same account. Yet a creative tendency remains evident—even the Russian religious Renaissance beginning with Vladimir Solovyov was a positive project in the sense that it represented a turn not only to religion but also to “the East,” in terms of a renewed interest in the Orthodox heritage. These currents, however, were not able to free themselves from Western

⁸Florovsky's debt to romanticism has been noted by Gallaher (2011, p. 671): “It appears that Florovsky was transmuting the Romantic notion of creativity as a supra-rational and quasi-revelatory intuition to catholicity. In an early piece, he claims that the cultural/spiritual creativity expressed in Russian Christianity operates not by a rationally discursive and causal comprehensiveness but by supra-rational bursts of creativity, which he describes as ‘feeling’, ‘mystical intuition’ and the ‘religiously enlightened gaze.’”

⁹The imperial mindset of Florovsky is discussed in Gavrilyuk (2014, p. 188) and Mjør (2011, p. 182).

mysticism and idealism, but Florovsky regards them as creative in their intentions and ambitions. True creativity involves a turn to the past.

This brings me to the second way Florovsky uses *tvorchestvo/tvorcheskii*: these terms describe a facet of human activity and of the human condition. In the foreword to *Ways of Russian Theology*, Florovsky writes that “the historian must never forget that he studies and describes the creative tragedy of human life. He must not, for he cannot. Unbiased history has never existed and never will” (Florovsky 1937, p. i; Florovsky 1979, p. xvii). The last point, that history cannot be unbiased, is essential to Florovsky; I will return to this idea below. Meanwhile, the quoted passage connects creativity with *tragedy*, whereby they are seen in terms of one another. By suggesting that tragedy is inherent in the human condition Florovsky appears to come quite close to Berdyaev, for whom human creativity was also tragic due to the objectification that it inevitably leads to. Yet, the notion of tragedy was, in my understanding, not as fundamental to Florovsky as it was to Berdyaev. There is indeed much that is “tragic” in Florovsky’s history of Russian thought, and he saw the past as an arena of tragic conflicts (Gavrilyuk 2014, p. 107). And yet genuine creativity is first and foremost a way of overcoming tragedy, and tragedy was possible to overcome precisely by means of creativity. For Florovsky it was, as noted, characteristic of the human condition, but it was not its essence. “Creative tragedy” here should perhaps be read as failed attempts but nevertheless attempts that display a positive intention. Again, the return to religion during the Russian religious Renaissance may serve as an example. Or as Florovsky puts it in the final chapter, “The history of Russian theology exhibits disarray in its creative development” (*chuvstvuetsia tvorcheskoe zameshatel'stvo*, Florovsky 1937, p. 502; Florovsky 2019, p. 162). This failure was due to a confusion arising somewhere in a process, which, at the outset, nevertheless appeared to be creative.

Third and most fundamentally, genuine “creativity,” being “creative” and doing something “creatively,” is for Florovsky equated with the “return to the Fathers.” The concept is therefore crucial to Florovsky’s project of a neopatristic synthesis. In *Ways of Russian Theology*, creativity thus understood is outlined in the short foreword and in the concluding “Breaks and Links” chapter, though never in an elaborate way. It always tends to prompt further interpretation.

Creativity through the return to the fathers

In the short preface to *Ways of Russian Theology*, Florovsky combines the adjective “creative” with “self-restoration” (*vosstanovlenie samogo sebia*) and “return” (*vozvrashchenie*) (Florovsky 1937, p. i–ii; Florovsky 1979, p. xvii); both address the reader—the Russian-Orthodox addressee convinced and perhaps also persuaded to contribute to the “Orthodox renaissance.” Meanwhile, Florovsky refers to the Fathers’ “creative resolution (*razreshenie*) of living tasks” and also to their “creative spirit.” Orthodoxy is the foundation for a “quest and creativity”:

All the genuine achievements of Russian theology were always linked with a creative return to patristic sources. [...] Yet the return to the fathers must not be solely intellectual or historical, it must be a return in spirit and prayer, a living

and creative self-restoration to the fullness of the Church in the entirety of sacred tradition. [...] a spiritual quest (*podvig*), a confession of faith, a creative resolution of living tasks. The ancient books were always inspired with this creative spirit. [...] Orthodoxy is once again revealed in patristic exegesis as a conquering power, as the power giving rebirth and affirmation to life, not only as a way station for tired and disillusioned souls; not only as the end but as the beginning, the beginning of a quest and creativity, a “new creature.” (Florovsky 1937, pp. i–ii; Florovsky 1979, p. xvii)

The claim made in this passage is that the return to the Fathers is the condition for being truly creative, and this eliminates the tragedy. Florovsky's preface refers to both their creativity and “our” potential creativity (that is his addressees'). However, our creative feats cannot be a mere repetition, even in a positive sense, of something similar to what they did, since this would actually put us on equal terms with them. This would be closer to Berdyaev's conception of creativity, which goes far in equaling human creativity with that of the Creator. Put differently, such an understanding would make us witnesses in the same way as the Church Fathers were witnesses, an ambition that probably lies beyond the possible within Florovsky's framework. Rather, our response should be to *them*, the Fathers, and to their testimonies. In what way and in what sense? The final chapter of the work, “Breaks and Links,” returns to this issue. A key passage is the following, even though it is a passage that raises new questions:

A recovery of the patristic style is the first and basic postulate for any Russian theological renaissance. The point is not some kind of ‘restoration’, nor does it imply a simple repetition or a return to the past. The road ‘to the Fathers’ in any case leads only forward, never back. The point is to be true to the patristic *spirit*, rather than to the *letter* alone, to light one's inspiration at the patristic flame rather than engaging in a collection and classification of ancient texts. *Unde ardet, inde lucet* [light is emitted from that which burns]! Genuine faithfulness to the Fathers can occur only in creation, never by imitation alone. (Florovsky 1937, p. 506; Florovsky 2019, p. 166, first italics added to the translation)

One could argue that in this passage there is just as much emphasis on what creativity is *not*. On the positive side, Florovsky emphasizes that it is a question of “style” and “spirit,” not “texts” and “letters.” I think it would be wrong to say that the “return to the Fathers” does not involve content in terms of key doctrines and dogmas, given Florovsky's condemnation of the importing of Western ideas, such as the Schellingianism of Sophiology.¹⁰ Yet the content must be created in a particular form, which, perhaps, sanctions the content. In patristics, be it classic or neopatristic, form and content become inseparable (Gallaher 2011, p. 667). It obviously has to do with “Greek style” (Christian Hellenism), but it is also a method, a procedure, that truly *adds*, that incorporates the old in the new. It stands in opposition to modernist ideal of negation.

Still, if “to the fathers” is not first and foremost about content, as Florovsky actually suggests, I would propose that creativity for Florovsky means, above all, a

¹⁰Teresa Obolevitch argues that Florovsky's concept of theology is not synonymous to doctrine, but involves also intellectual reflection, religious experience, and contemplation (Obolevitch 2022, p. 10).

feeling for history and historical continuity—continuation in history and of history. It can be read as “back into history,” but not back *to*, if by “back to” is meant disconnecting oneself from the present. We can also describe what Florovsky calls here a quest for a greater sense of “historicity” or, to use Florovsky’s own term, “historism,” which is not to be confused with the nineteenth century paradigm for historical inquiry (*Historismus*). Florovsky’s idea of historism situates every event and creative output in time but it does not relativize, as nineteenth-century historicism did. History for Florovsky is cumulative, it accumulates experiences, whereby Florovsky is concerned with ecclesiastical experience, which he expresses in terms such as “catholic consciousness,” “sobornost,” “testimony (*svidetel’stvo*) of the whole church.” The history that the orthodox thinker should return to, merge with, and then proceed from, is *this* history. Hence, “history” is not any kind of history, any experience, and perhaps not even the tragedy. It is the true tradition.

This awareness of history, of being historical, then, is the requirement for creativity, or even a central component of creativity itself:

Christianity exists entirely within history and it is entirely about history. It is not only a *revelation in history*, but a *call to history*, a call to action and creativity in history. In the Church everything is dynamic, everything is action and movement, from Pentecost to the great day of the Second Coming. This movement does not signify a departure from the past. On the contrary, it can be seen as an unceasing process of harvesting the bounties of the past. Holy Tradition quickens and lives in creativity. (Florovsky 1937, p. 508; Florovsky 2019, p. 168)

Creativity, this passage suggests, is not really creative unless it builds on and incorporates previous experience. On the other hand, as long as it does, there is no blueprint. What is essential is that every human action should contribute to the *same* dynamic unfolding of history. True creativity must see history as cumulative and unidirectional. History may consist of breaks and disruptions—Florovsky’s view was not determinist or evolutionary—but if the historical awareness, as described by Florovsky, is present, it remains in the overall perspective linear and even progressive. In accordance with the Christian conception of history, it is oriented towards the end; history has “a unique beginning, central event and ultimate goal, told by Scripture” (Breisach 2007, p. 78). History is an “unceasing process” (cf. the quotation above).

In other words, one must grow into the Church and live within this mysterious, timeless and all-encompassing tradition that contains the fullness of all revelations and insights. This and this alone is the guarantee of creative productivity [...] What needs to happen is not at all a translation of dogmatic formulae from an obsolete idiom into a modern one, but rather a creative return to the accumulated experience of the past, a past that needs to be experienced anew, with one’s modern thoughts incorporated into the continuous fabric of conciliar [*soborny*] fullness. (Florovsky 1937, pp. 507, 511; Florovsky 2019, pp. 167, 170)

What these passages suggest most crucially is that the return to fathers is a kind of reset: a turn away from the modern disruptive, revolutionary understanding of history and a turn to the experience of historical continuity and fullness. (In addition

to various kinds of Westernization, there is perhaps also an implicit response to the Russian revolution here.) A central notion in the passage quoted above, in my view, is precisely “accumulated.”¹¹ History is accumulation, and mere imitation or copying, be it of the Fathers or the West, does not really lead to accumulation. Imitation for Florovsky tends rather to erase significant distinctions between past and present, between patristics and neopatristics. World History from Florovsky's point of view is *one*, and the purpose is to contribute to the unfolding of it.

My conclusion thus far is, therefore, that creativity for Florovsky is first and foremost about history, about creating a feeling for historical fullness and finding one's proper place in it, all aspects that for him were deeply ecclesiastical. The question remains, however, whether this really solves the problem as to why Florovsky uses this concept. Apart from stressing that Christian culture should not be imitation and preservation, what does it add? What I suggest in the following is that this is where the conceptual contest comes in. To frame creativity as a feeling for history represents a critique of, above all, Berdyaev and Bulgakov. Moreover, I think also that the formulation “creative return” in the passage quoted above says something about how one should relate to the past *in* the present, that is, how one should *perceive* history.

Florovsky's creativity in context

The Russian philosopher most frequently associated with “creativity,” perhaps even internationally, is arguably Nikolai Berdyaev. According to himself this was the “main theme of my life” (Berdyaev 1949, p. 225). For the existentialist Berdyaev, human creativity was enabled on the one hand by human freedom, on the other by our divine likeness. Employing the basic categories of classic Orthodox anthropology and deification, Berdyaev defined the human being as the “image and likeness of absolute being” (Berdyaev 1989, pp. 288, 296). This anthropodicy, that is, the religious justification of the human being, has been enabled by the incarnation, which revealed the divine likeness of every human being.

According to Berdyaev, the full implications of this have only been discovered “now,” or in modernity. Traditional Christian theology, including the patristic tradition, did not fully discover the human being's creative potential. It did not sufficiently acknowledge human freedom and did not realize that the human being is “similar to” or “like” (*podobnyi*) God, the Creator, and therefore also *creative* (Berdyaev 1989, pp. 317, 332, 361). Theologians of the past, Berdyaev claims, possessed a doctrine of deification without fully involving the human being. It had no genuine anthropology. Asceticism prevailed, the main attitude towards God was humility and other negative virtues (cf. Coates 2019, pp. 131, 137). It follows that both “then” and “now,” Christians have responded to the incarnation, but in different ways. The modern understanding of it represents for Berdyaev the true way to true creativity.

Berdyaev, moreover, saw human creativity, *tvorchestvo*, as a “continuation (*prodolzhenie*)” of God's creation. It is a theurgic act, “activity together with God,”

¹¹It should be noted that Klimoff's translation here is somewhat free, but, in my view, it captures the essence of Florovsky's argument well.

on the “eight day of creation” (Berdyaev 1989, pp. 309, 354, 363–364). At the same time, Berdyaev’s notion of creativity is, as noted earlier, tragic: Berdyaev celebrates the creative acts, but not their objectified results, of which culture is made up.

In Bulgakov’s philosophy of economy, we encounter a model that could be described as more modest in comparison to that of Berdyaev. Bulgakov emphasizes that “human creativity can only reproduce a likeness, not create an image” (Bulgakov 2000, p. 146; Bulgakov 1993, p. 159). To create an image in biblical terms would mean to create from nothing, and for Bulgakov such attempts are “Satanic.” He maintains that there is a major distinction between creativity, *Tvorchestvo*, and Creation, *Tvorenie*. Creativity means reproduction (*vosproizvedenie*) according to divine images.¹²

The meaning of “culture” as Bulgakov uses it often comes close to “cultivation”—this was after all a work on “economy” (*khoziaistvo*), but Bulgakov’s ideas are arguably speculations also on the nature of cultural production in a humanistic sense. This implies that the notion of “reproduction” may be read also as a metaperspective on his own “translation” of the Church Fathers into the modern philosophical language of Schelling, which is how he defines his project at the outset. For Bulgakov, the Church Fathers were “religious materialists.” According to an illustrative formulation by Bulgakov, “Christianity is a philosophy of identity” (Bulgakov 2000, pp. 38, 88; Bulgakov 1993, pp. 51, 100).¹³ Like Berdyaev, Bulgakov’s philosophical project relates to the patristic heritage, and while for Berdyaev it represents the past in terms of a phase of Christian world history, for Bulgakov it serves as a complementary perspective. While held in high esteem by both (more so by Bulgakov), patristics has neither for Bulgakov any absolute authority on doctrinal matters. And as Ruth Coates has shown, Bulgakov’s translation project, or synthesis, tends to privilege Schelling’s perspectives over the patristic ones, whenever they are in tension (Coates 2019, p. 173). One could read this as a reflection of the progressivism that Bulgakov’s sophiology after all retained, despite the criticism of materialist and positivist ideas of progress that he and others had put forth in the famous volumes *Problems of Idealism* of 1902 and *Landmarks* of 1909 (cf. Poole 2013). The remnants of progressivism in Bulgakov were perhaps due to Solovyov’s strong influence on him and referred to a free moral progress rather than a predetermined material “progress.” In any case, Bulgakov’s idealist, neo-Schellingian philosophy of economy was also a kind of “return to the Fathers,” but a return that had the nineteenth and twentieth century experience as its horizon.

Thus, both Berdyaev and Bulgakov put on display their own historicity in their engagement with the patristic tradition, and both projects differ significantly from Florovsky’s program. Berdyaev discerns a potential in the patristic legacy, but his overall evaluation is that the Church Fathers had “not yet” discovered the human

¹²By the time of his next work, *The Unfading Light* (1917), Bulgakov’s understanding of creation and creativity had evolved in the direction of Berdyaev (who had published his *Meaning of Creativity* in the meantime). Also due to the impact of Gregory Palamas, Bulgakov now regarded human creation as founded on divine or absolute creation, that is, to be understood as an analog to it (Biriukov 2019, pp. 77–78).

¹³An equally interesting example of Bulgakov’s philosophy as a creative translation project can be found in his rendering of hesychast vocabulary (Gregory Palamas) by means of modern philosophical concepts, including *tvorchestvo* (Biriukov (2019, p. 76).

being in full. Bulgakov's evaluation is more positive. For him, the Fathers represent a sound alternative to rationalism (for instance its opposition of subject to object), but it was at the same time a legacy that modern idealism had re-actualized. One reason for Florovsky's use of creativity in this context, then, could be that it offers a correction to the approach to the past represented by Berdyaev and Bulgakov. He uses their own concept against them in a critique of their privileging of the present.

Here it must be noted, however, that Florovsky, too, promoted an approach to the past that very much acknowledged the engagement and situatedness of the historian, or the historicity of the human being. The central text here is his 1925 article "On the Types of Historical Interpretation," which was a critique of nineteenth-century historicism and Ranke's program for studying and describing the past "as it really was." Florovsky saw, by contrast, the past as always being an "image of the past" (*obraz proshlogo*), and hence the result of the historian's active engagement with it, formed not least by the questions s/he asks. Without this engagement history cannot become meaningful. Inspired by Benedetto Croce, Florovsky sees history as dependent on imagination (*videnie v voobrazhenii*), speculation, contemplation, and construction. History, historiography, is always active. It is conditioned by our questioning, and even influenced by our own emotions.

Understanding—and precisely because it is understanding—is a twofold act, in which the subject takes a *creative part*—it is a unique dialogue. [...] In a judgment a *creative* and dynamic balance is established between the "suggestions of the sources" and the awareness of the historian, between his/her intuitive sensitivity and the plastic force of his/her sensible imagination. (Florovsky 1925, pp. 529–30, italics added)

In this quote, we see that the notion of creativity plays a central role in Florovsky's (historical) epistemology. This brings us to the alternative understanding of *tvorchestvo* that I briefly presented in the introduction of this article: In addition to the metaphysical understanding of Berdyaev and Bulgakov, thinkers such as Solovyov and Stepun (to mention examples from the Russian context) used it as an epistemological concept. I shall limit my discussion here to Solovyov. In *Critique of Abstract Principles*, Solovyov proposes an epistemology according to which knowledge of the world, in addition to empirical input and concepts, requires "faith, imagination and creativity" (which is the title of Chapter XLV). Faith here means confidence in the existence of what we perceive, whereas our imagination creates an idea of the object we perceive. Creativity, finally, is about synthesizing impressions and ideas so that what we sense becomes truly meaningful. This synthesis requires the "creative act of our mind" (Solovyov 1990, p. 731), which in turn has a formative impact on the world surrounding us.

Florovsky's idea of historical interpretation does not cite Solovyov or make any explicit adoption of this or similar theories of creativity. However, his ideas about historical interpretation contain, in my view, obvious similarities, and I would suggest that this parallel makes up an additional explanation for why the notion of creativity enters his program of a "return to the Fathers." True understanding of the past is a creative construction. As Florovsky himself argued in his 1925 article on historical understanding, under the impact of Croce, perception is creative, not least when dealing with the past.

Conclusions

The importance of the perceptive aspect, or rather the apperceptive aspect, may explain why Florovsky, within the framework of the neopatristic synthesis, turned, somewhat unexpectedly given his negative evaluation of the Renaissance legacy, to the concept of “creativity.” Creativity for him was about the proper understanding of and proper way of relating to the past. *The Ways of Russian Theology* is often referred to as Florovsky’s “magnum opus” (see e.g. Künkel 1991, p. 261; Mjør 2011, p. 161; Gavrilyuk 2014, p. 31; Florovsky 2019, p. 70), though this is a description that does not immediately make sense, however impressive and erudite the work was, given its predominantly critical intention. A theologian’s major work would normally be a systematic treatise, not a work spending most of the time criticizing thinkers of the past for having chosen the “wrong way.” However, the importance of the work lies, also, in its *apophatic* dimension (Mjør 2011, p. 194; Obolevitch 2022, p. 26). It is a work that indirectly suggests that one should relate to the past by way of forging proper “links” instead of the “breaks”—to refer to the title of the final chapter of the work—that have prevailed in the history of Russian thought thus far. In the situation in which the work was written, the forging of links was deemed possible by the author only by way of a creative, perceptively active, return.

Florovsky’s references to creativity thus read as a corrective to the hegemonic philosophies of the Russian Renaissance, which continued to flourish in emigration. *Ways of Russian Theology* aims to describe what genuine creativity is, namely a way of relating to History that does not privilege the present in the way Berdyaev and Bulgakov did. However, we seem to encounter a paradox here, since Florovsky’s historical epistemology, too, indeed privileges the present, that is, the standpoint of the historian. Apparently, this is precisely what Berdyaev and Bulgakov also did: They evaluated the past (the patristic legacy) on the basis of the present and adjusted it to the needs of their philosophical projects (philosophy of creativity; philosophy of economy). I would argue, though, that whereas they all shared a recognition of the situatedness of historical understanding, there exists an important difference between Florovsky on the one hand and Berdyaev and Bulgakov on the other; the latter maintained the privileging of the present also in the subsequent evaluation of the past. They saw the past as being improved upon in the present. Florovsky, by contrast, having analyzed the crisis of the present, concluded that one had to actively place the patristic heritage, the past, at the center, as the benchmark. Our task is to return to it in terms of fulfilling it in time. Crucially, the turn towards the patristic past is an active choice, or at least in modernity, with all the wrong roads taken in the Russian past, it has *become* an active choice. It presupposes likewise the recognition of the patristic tradition as the norm.

By the same token, Florovsky does not endorse the disruptions so characteristic of his own age. Creativity for him was not to be found at various “crossroads,” as Dostoevsky and Berdyaev idealized Russian hybridity between East and West. In the conclusion to *Ways of Russian Theology*, these are options that Florovsky rejects. Likewise, the return to the Fathers is not merely about theological issues, it is just as much a question of rediscovering one’s identity in the “East” as a “living tradition.” “Creativity is not possible outside a living tradition [zhivoe predanie]” (Florovsky 1937, p. 512; Florovsky 2019, p. 172).

Creativity, and hence the neopatristic synthesis, is therefore, I would argue, ultimately an idealist project, however paradoxical this may sound, given Florovsky's critique of idealism in Russian thought. And yet creativity for Florovsky was about imagining oneself as part of *one* continuous history of accumulated experiences, where you build on and incorporate the achievements of your true predecessors in order to inscribe yourself into the tradition emerging from their legacy.¹⁴ Several scholars have noted that Florovsky's program for a neopatristic synthesis was vague (Künkel 1991, pp. 261–276; Horujy 2000, p. 137; Mjør 2011, pp. 193–194), but the notion of creativity gives us a hint of how to understand it better. For Florovsky, creativity requires imagination: the ability to situate oneself in what Mikhail Bakhtin called the “great time” (*bol'shoe vremia*, Bakhtin 1979, p. 331), where historical boundaries are erased through our dialogue with ancient texts, texts that are thereby renewed. As my reading has suggested, creativity for Florovsky *was* the active understanding of oneself and one's tasks as part of a history that extended beyond the here and now and its latest and most fashionable innovations. The reverse side of this was, as many critical readings of his historiography has shown, a tendency to manipulate history for his own purposes (Horowitz 2013, p. 237).¹⁵

Even though Florovsky was strongly opposed to many key features of Romanticism, *Ways of Russian Theology* testifies to a strong belief in the power of imagination. Moreover, like one of the founding fathers of romanticism, Jean Jacques Rousseau, he seems to have believed that the remedy could be found in the very cultural forms and practices that he sought to reject, that is, through a critical and yet creative use of them.¹⁶ The concept of creativity was one of these tools.

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Declarations

Competing Interests The corresponding author declares that there is no conflict of interest involved in this article.

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¹⁴Obolevitch (2022, 16) suggests that Florovsky's oft-quoted phrase “The road ‘to the Fathers’ in any case leads only forward, never back” (Florovsky 2019, 166) means “‘moving forward’ *with* the Fathers” (my emphasis).

¹⁵In particular, scholars have focused on Florovsky's distorted portrayal of the Ukrainian baroque (see e.g. Sysyn 1984). On the importance of imagination for creativity more generally, that is, of imagining that which is not empirically observable and which transgresses the domain of truth-boundedness, see Bohm (1998, pp. 41–61) and Stokes (2014). Stokes emphasizes that creativity in this sense may even be described as manipulative (Stokes 2014, p. 162), of which, I believe, Florovsky's historical writing was a case in point.

¹⁶Cf. Jean Starobinski (1989, pp. 165–232), who described Rousseau's key strategy as *remède dans le mal*: The “antidote” can be found in the “poison” that modern culture represented. Rousseau's project was therefore not a complete rejection of modernity, but a critique of it from within.

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