

## *Volentem ducunt:* Guiding the Willing Out of a Tunnel

In his *Obratnaia perspekiva* (Reverse perspective), a lecture written in October 1919, Pavel Florensky (1882-1937) notes: “The liveliness of the discussion that ensued brought home to me that the question of space was one of the fundamental ones in art and, I would go even further, in the understanding of the world in general.”<sup>1</sup> Then again in a letter to his daughter Ol’ga, sent from Solovki on the 13<sup>th</sup> May 1937, the year of his assassination, he retorts:

The secret of creativity lies in the preservation of youth. The secret of genius lies in the preservation of something infantile, an infantile intuition that endures throughout life. It is a question of a certain constitution that provides genius with an objective perception of the world, one that does not gravitate towards a centre: a kind of reverse perspective, one that is, therefore, integral and real.<sup>2</sup>

As the perception becomes drawn to gravitate towards some centre, the creativity that springs from the preservation of youthfulness becomes challenged. Innocence is lost. Genius is forfeited and perspective acquires the potential for the violation of the real. After Baudelaire, Florensky declares genius to be no more than childhood recaptured at will; “childhood equipped now with man’s physical means to express itself, and with the analytical mind that enables it to bring order into the sum of experience, involuntarily amassed.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Pavel Florensky, *Beyond Vision*, trans. Wendy Salmond (London: Reaktion Books, 2002), 300.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>3</sup> Charles-Pierre Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays* (London: Penguin Books, 2010), 11.

The child that does not allow its perceptions to be pulled here and there like some lost moon desperately seeking to gravitate towards some centre is a child savant. The expression of its genius is a kind of refusal to acknowledge the subject/object dualism as expressed by:

The observer who brings nothing of his own to the world, who cannot even synthesize his own fragmentary impressions; who, since he does not enter into a living interaction with the world and does not live in it, is not aware of his own reality either...[Who] yet on the basis of his own furtive experience constructs all of reality, all of it, on the pretext of objectivity, squeezing it into what he had observed of reality's own differential.<sup>4</sup>

Florensky boldly condemns Leonardo, Descartes and Kant whose world views grow from the soil of the renaissance and whose visual art equivalent, perspective, is as he claims an expression of meonism and the impersonal.

The term *meonism* derives from the Greek μη ὦν, (*un-being*) a concept axiomatic to the philosophical theory of the poet and philosopher Nikolai Minsky (1885-1937) for whom all human striving towards the absolute necessarily fails. Since God is dispersed within eternity, Minsky declares any knowledge of *It* is paradoxically unattainable. Minsky was also one of the conveners of the religious-philosophical gatherings that Florensky frequented. In keeping with these ideas and as heir to the linguistic school of W. von Humboldt Florensky therefore studiously reflects on the dynamic aspect of language as a *pinning* (μη) of the spirit (ὦν) to express itself and, accordingly he shows sympathy with the avant-garde poetic theories of his time.

With perspectival artistry such as this, meonism embodies thought doomed to all kinds of passivity that:

For an instant, as if by stealth, furtively spies on the world through a chink between subjective facets. Thought, that is lifeless and motionless, incapable of grasping movement and laying claim to a divine certainty, specifically about its own place and its own instant of peeking out.<sup>5</sup>

This rejection of perspectives actually creates a challenge to our vision of the world today. Indeed the practitioner of perspectival science observes six conditions that Pavel Florensky in this lecture vehemently criticizes, ending his talk by claiming that:

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<sup>4</sup> Florensky, *Beyond Vision*, 264.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 264.

In the present analysis the limited nature of naturalism had to be overcome from within, showing how 'fata volentem ducunt, nolentem trahunt', the fates guide those who are willing but compel those who are unwilling, to liberation and spirituality.<sup>6</sup>

The whole thrust of Florensky's epistemological quest strives to shed light on the experience of truth as gained in a lived contact with reality. For him all being is nothing but symbolic of Sophia, the all-embracing reality linking both Creator and creature together. This metaphysics he transcribes into a sophiological key variously designated as the *great root of the total creature, the guardian angel of creation* and *the eternal spouse of the Word of God*. "Linear perspective," he claims,

is a machine for annihilating reality, an infernal yawn that swallows everything wherein the vanishing point functions. Conversely reverse perspective, like a fountain of reality spurting into the world, serves to generate reality, extract it from non-being and advance it into reality. Point of darkness and point of light, such is the correlation of the centres of 'inverse' and 'linear' perspective.<sup>7</sup>

He makes this exceptional statement and in its light please allow me to invite you, dear reader, for instance to take a moment from reading, to lift up your sight and look at anything, wherever you happen to be, calmly; some flowers, perhaps, that may be in the room, or a book, a plate, the ring on your finger or a tile on the floor, anything really. Just look very simply, and serenely note what might start to happen rather quickly. Besides the physical form, besides the vision, the mind, the name therefore starts to push its way into your awareness. The *flowers* speak to your mind and your feelings with your very own voice; your attitudes come in sight and your ideas, your relationship to them...and suddenly those *flowers* start to transform into something more abstract, colour, feeling, but ironically more real. A wider, perhaps more open consciousness challenges "the individual judgement of the single person with his single point of view."<sup>8</sup> Where previously there was a perspective characteristic of a fragmented awareness, where previously there was a deception, now perception arises, thoroughly (Latin: *per*) seizing (Latin: *capere*) the event in an ever widening vision with, so to speak, the abstraction of the *flowers*, the *book*, *plate* or whatever at its centre, everywhere. In view of this as Florensky notes, perspective arises not so much in pure artistic expressions as in the applied art of scenography, the seductive deception of stage design:

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 272.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 93.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 208.

[P]ure painting is, or at least wants to be, above all True to life; not a substitute for life but merely the symbolic signifier of its deepest reality. Stage design is a *screen* that thickens the light of existence while pure painting is a *window* opened wide on reality...that provides for penetration.<sup>9</sup>

Florensky attempts to catch that reality that perspective shuts down. In the final analysis, and in terms of using sight, he suggests that there are only two ways to experience the world; *the window*, the human being looks out through and *the screen*, the scientific (i.e. Kantian) experience of *looking at* (something). One (the former) is defined by a subtle (call it *internal*) attitude, the other *the screen*, by a gross and physically assisted demeanour (call it *external*). The contemplative, creative culture as one opens and looks out through *the windows* of perception, is radically distinct from that predatory, *viz.* mechanical culture geared to merely amassing information to be displayed on the various and varied *screens* that separate the human soul from the real, the intangible.

The facile experience of the world therefore consists in the theatricality of perspectival depictions devoid of both the feeling for reality and the sense of responsibility that sees life merely as a spectacle, a performance. Florensky without any equivocation, claims that perspective means to deceive.

The Artist David Hockney's show, up at the *Pace Gallery* in New York, from April 5th to May 12th of 2018: *Something New in Painting (and Photography) [and even Printing]* explosively depicted his energetic inquest into the contributions of reverse perspective even as expounded in Florensky's lecture essay. Lawrence Weschler declares in his introduction to the exhibition: "Hockney deploys hexagonal canvases, the lower ends notched out, so as to allow the eye to bend the picture far beyond the frame. As Hockney quips, 'Far from cutting corners, I was adding them.'<sup>10</sup> Then he goes on to suggest what Hockney means by reverse perspective:

[B]y way of an allusion to an experience he once had coursing through the arrow-straight eighteen kilometer St Gotthard Pass road tunnel, the tiny pinpoint of light ahead epitomizing 'the hell of one-point perspective, I suddenly realized (Hockney tells Weschler) how that is the basis of all conventional photographic perspective, that endless regress to an infinitely distant point in the middle of the image, how everything is hurtling away from you and you yourself are not even in the picture at all. But then, as we got to the end of the tunnel everything *suddenly*

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 209.

<sup>10</sup> David Hockney and Lawrence Weschler, *Something New in Painting (and Photography) [and even Printing]* (New York: Pace Gallery, 2018), Introduction.

reversed with the world opening out in every direction...and I realized how that, and not its opposite, was the effect I wanted to capture.<sup>11</sup>

Now in the Sanskrit philosophy of language, which Florensky seems so obviously to have been aware of, the effect of this sudden reversal of perspectival vision would readily be termed *sphota*. The word *sphota* is derived from the seminal *sphut* (to burst). The term also captures a robust sense of clarity. *Sphota* is a commonly used word for the Sanskrit deconstructionists. Sometimes it is used to signify the permanent aspect of a phoneme, sometimes in the sense of *meaning bearer* or *expressive word*, and different from the articulated sound called *dhvani*.

*Mādhavāchārya* derives the word in two ways. Firstly *sphota* is 'that which expresses a meaning'...Secondly it is 'that which is manifested by letters'...These definitions are offered keeping in view the process of communication through language. Hence the first definition is with reference to the speaker and the second with reference to the listener.<sup>12</sup>

The concept came about in the analysis of the need to explain how particular vocal characters, the letters assemble, how the sounds they represent mingle and interact to form meaningful words. Thus *sphota* is taken to be the eternal essence of words both because it manifests their meaning (actually called *artha*, value) and also because it is made manifest in the phonetic rendering of the letters. But finally, the Sanskrit *vyakaranin* (*lit.* the deconstructionists, that we insist in calling *grammarians*) identify *sphota* as:

The hidden or underlying power behind individual letters of a word which present the meaning of the word to the reader or hearer of it...It is the single meaningful symbol. The articulated sounds used in linguistic discourse are merely the means by which the symbol is revealed according to the Sanskrit [scholars] who propounded the theory.<sup>13</sup>

Florensky's lecture examines the shift from the flat surface experience of the screen rendering of reality, axiomatic of perspectival vision, to the burst of lucidity, the *sphota* of the panoramic view *sub specie aeternitatis*. He speaks of the Italian poet *Francesco Petrarca* and how, in 1336, he, Petrarch, climbed a mountain with the specific intent to merely observe and somehow *capture* the view; something that no one seems to have even thought of doing before. The

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> M. S. Murti, *Bhartrihari the Grammarian* (New Delhi: Sahita Akademi, 1997), 34.

<sup>13</sup> John Grimes, *A Concise Dictionary of Indian Philosophy* (Varanasi: Indica Books, 2009), 352.

exhilarating experience he receives there, he expresses as being an apotheosis of the soul gripped by the profound sense of synchronicity.

Petrarch feels as though he had stepped through an enchanted portal into *some other dimension*. In trepidation of this thrilling experience he seeks support and reaches out for his copy of Augustine's *Confessions* that he happened to have at hand. His eye falls on the passage, as quoted in Jean Gebser's *The Ever-Present Origin*, that reads:

And men went forth to behold high mountains and the mighty surge of the sea, and the broad stretches of the rivers and the inexhaustible ocean, and the paths of the stars, and so doing, *loose themselves* in wonderment.<sup>14</sup>

This *losing oneself in wonderment* becomes for Florensky the constitution that provides genius, i.e. the human soul, with the recognition of a world that is not merely arising from some *I*, some vanishing point lost in some remote dark corner of life as flattened by those sedentary and lustful cravings spinning from its pathologically incessant passions for appropriation and attachment. "The pathos of modern man is to shake off all realities, so that 'I want' establishes the law of a newly constructed reality, phantasmagorical even though it is enclosed within ruled-out squares."<sup>15</sup>

Perspective therefore becomes for Pavel, an expression of meonism (*un-being*) where the subject, the observer of the perspectival, is denuded and deflated of reality. On the other hand the reverse is what he terms *the pathos of ancient man*:

The pathos of ancient man, and of mediaeval man too, is the acceptance, the grateful acknowledgment, and the affirmation of all kinds of reality as a blessing, for being is blessing, and blessing is being. The pathos of mediaeval man is an affirmation of reality both in himself and outside himself.<sup>16</sup>

There is, therefore, a constitution that provides the human genius with that particular perception of the world from what is not merely some *I*, some personality trait as is often intimated. Rather it manifests as a *state of emergenc(e)y* that can suddenly open up and out from one's being to embrace reality in the lived knowledge of the pristine bliss that attends the childlike recognition of one's true and *unadulterated* nature. Florensky's words thus bear repeating: "It

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<sup>14</sup> Jean Gebser, *The Ever-Present Origin*, trans. Noel Barstad and Algis Mickunas (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1986), 12-15.

<sup>15</sup> Florensky, *Beyond Vision*, 217.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 217.

is a question of a certain constitution that provides genius with an objective perception of the world – one that does not gravitate towards a centre.<sup>17</sup>

In one sense this is a deeply enigmatic statement and in another it is explosive, mind-boggling, even world-changing. Sometime later Paul Klee, in his notebooks, will claim that the geometric point that Euclid terms as *semeion* (*lit.* a seed) stands at the *orgasmic source* of the cosmos, so also Florensky here intimates the same ... although surprisingly in reverse mode ... a perception therefore *that does not gravitate towards a centre* and yet allows genius *an objective perception of the world*.

The renaissance world-view, steeped in the Aristotelian logical principles, forcibly *re-educates* the entire human psycho-physiology and makes abstract demands, *essentially anti-artistic, essentially outlawing art, especially the visual arts*. The sacred increasingly becomes just an excuse for depicting the profane, the body and the landscape. Hamlet's renowned dictum, *to be or not to be*, then lends its full thrust towards the fragmenting of the soul of the new age man steeped in the dualities of thinking that were to become the tools for, and causes of, so much misery and suffering for 20<sup>th</sup> century humanity.

Florensky's contemporary, Jean Gebser, in his ground breaking *The Ever-Present Origin* explores the various layers of the constitution of consciousness culminating in the negative aspects of the mental structures that begin to emerge with the dawn of the Renaissance when the certainty of the theocentric world view becomes suspect, and where, along with the music of the spheres, there now sounds a cacophonous dirge arising from the obstinate affirmation of the human being having a separate and possibly separable identity. This ego centred individuation process then steadily and surely leads even towards the emergence of nationhood that forms the attitudinal basis for the terrible conflicts that erupt thereafter in their wake.

Then begins the attempt to replace realities that are growing muddied and obscured with simulacra and phantoms, to replace theurgy (divine agency) with illusionistic art, to replace divine actions with theatre...A secular vision that progressively abandoned the mystical, or more exactly the mysterial reality of the tragedies of Aeschylus, then Sophocles and finally Euripides.<sup>18</sup>

A perspectival vision therefore, that fixes the observer and the observed in space and in time; man on the one hand, and the world on the other. In turn compellingly isolationist, man's attitude in the face of the world tends towards

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 50.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 221ff.



hostility and becomes confrontational. The world that responds manifests its extraordinary expanse and power that the dilation of the ego attempts to command, using technologies ultimately rooted in the very same potencies that they attempt to harness.

The *condottiere*, the Renaissance man seeped in this overwhelming sense of self-importance becomes the standard for the coming humanity, the humanity that we in the last four centuries have been born into. For as long as there was any form of moderation present and effective, the mental processes of abstraction and quantification were incapable of producing dire negative effects; but when moderation came to be displaced by *ratio*, i.e. division, as is most clearly evident in Descartes, the processes of abstraction morphed into an overwhelming sense of isolationism, while that of quantification led to the practice of amassment and agglomerating greed. Gebser, writing in the terrible forties and fifties decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century tells us:

These consequences are partially characteristic of our time. Isolation is visible everywhere: isolation of individuals, of entire nations and continents; isolation in the physical realm in the form of tuberculosis; in the political in the form of ideological or monopolistic dictatorship; in everyday life in the form of immoderate, 'busy' activity devoid of any sense-direction or relationship to the world as a whole; isolation in thinking in the form of the deceptive dazzle of premature judgements or hypertrophied abstraction devoid of any connection with the world. And it is the same with mass-phenomena: overproduction, inflation, and the proliferation of political parties, rampant technology, and atomization in all forms.

What sustained or reinforced the so called 'development' over the past 400 years, which led to these results, can be found in the notion of technology that brought about the age of the machine with the aid of perspectival, technical drafting; in the notion of progress that spawned the 'age of progress'; and in the radical rationalism that, as we are surely justified in saying, summoned the 'age of the world wars.'<sup>19</sup>

In his archaeology of consciousness Gebser examines the constitution of the levels of awareness as they form the strata of the human psyche. He speaks of an *archaic* level of the structure of consciousness, which has a zero-dimensional identity, a time of complete non-differentiation of man and the universe. A time marked with a defining sense of wholeness, when the soul/psyche is still dormant.

In turn the *magic* structure becomes an expression of one-dimensional unity and man's merging with nature as distinct from what he terms the *mythical*

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<sup>19</sup> Gebser, *The Ever-Present Origin*, 94.



structure of consciousness, wherein are located the terms of expression of a two-dimensional polarity. The characteristic attribute of the *magic* stratum therefore appears as the emotional realm of the waking human psyche, whereas that of the *mythical*, the imagination. Abstraction then becomes the identifying characteristic of the subsequent *mental* structures of consciousness.

Gebser's emphasis stays with his assertion that this archaeology of consciousness, designated as the *archaic*, the *magical*, the *mythical*, the *mental* and the *integral*, is not merely constituted of past events, but "are in fact still present in a more or less latent and acute form in each one of us."<sup>20</sup>

Perspective (associated with the mental structures of awareness) therefore becomes the pre-eminent expression of the emergent consciousness of 15<sup>th</sup> century European man, the palpable expression of his objectivation of spatial awareness. Besides illuminating space, perspective brings it to man's awareness and lends man his own visibility of himself. This evident perception comes to light for the first time in the paintings of Giotto and Masaccio. Yet this very same perspective, whose study and acquisition were a major preoccupation for Renaissance man, not only extends his image of the world by achieving spatialization, but also narrows his vision – a consequence that still afflicts us today.<sup>21</sup>

David Hockney's tunnel vision then settles in and quickly proceeds to define for humanity at large, the sedentary lifestyle that has now, at the commencement of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, become the norm for the larger portion of the masses. The *mental* structure of consciousness that produces perspective also unleashes a rather superficial appreciation of the world. It is this that we ought to excavate to seek the deeper, and the subtler, that we may refresh, reassess and re-access all the other creative aspects of awareness.

Our faculties of sight and hearing, but not exclusively of course, can do this and as example I would ask you, yet again dear reader, to start hearing right now as you read. Hear the sounds in the room, the sounds in the building and beyond; and you might, if your investigation is sharpened, even perhaps catch the sounds of these very written words, *speaking* in the silent expanse of the mind, possibly flowing as in a stream with other thoughts, feelings and attitudes.<sup>22</sup>

Learn to listen to the sound of the voice as others speak or even as you yourself speak, and discover that hearing voices never excludes what is uttered but holds

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 42.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>22</sup> In the Semitic Maltese language these latter forms of thought/feelings are identified by the term *ħoss* (with the sound *ħ* for *home*) that literally means *sound* in a family of languages where the contents of the mind are identified as *sonant*.

much more besides. There are emotive strands there. There are colourings of attitudes and directions of feelings there also.

Then, quite suddenly, who knows, you might rush out of the *metaphorical* tunnel vision and experience directly what is being uttered, differently. Even as your appreciation of speech starts to touch on some subtler awareness as to what one really is, as to how the seemingly fixed relational characteristics of discourse may start to evaporate, even then one may seek the deeper, greater realms of the vast ocean that is the non-dual, *aperspectival* foundation of the phenomenal experience.

As the perspective with its vanishing point at *what-is-said* turns around on itself to give rise to a spontaneous immersion in the heightened awareness of the realm of becoming, suddenly catching some glimpse not of, to repeat, merely *what* is said but also *who* is saying it, *why* s/he is saying it, *where* s/he is saying it *from*, and *what* s/he may be saying about it..., then suddenly the sense of the limitless may start to become apparent. The sense of a reversal breaking the narrow confines of the merely perspectival tunnel world-view may start to become shown, sometimes even rather dramatically. Then simply, in the silence that supports all that is spoken, all that is witnessed, there is no lack, no dearth of possibilities. But let me come to the end of this now.

Pavel Florensky proceeds to say in his essay: "In particular, the vanishing point tends to be presented as a negative point, and at this point, the schemes fundamental to perspectival representation converge – which becomes the compositional center of the picture."<sup>23</sup> Therefore, a hard blackness seeps into the human heart as we move through life. As we have come to know it, life's composition extends and grows complex, and with the advent of perspectival vision and its consequences, its techniques, the world recedes from the viewer, *the flaneur*: "It is only when they lose their spontaneous relationship to the world that children lose reverse perspective (their *obratnaja perspektiva*)."<sup>24</sup>

On the other hand, the appreciation of iconography gently embraces the being to allow time for the heart to melt, dispelling darkness by transcending it. This prepares for the cultivation of a human stand that from being furtive and recessive morphs into becoming a firm and strongly sustained position, wherein "the viewer thinks that the composition [of the real] is extending and growing."<sup>25</sup> Growing away therefore, even as the hardness melts. "However, for its spatial or

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<sup>23</sup> Florensky, *Beyond Vision*, 92.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 219.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 92.

depictive function, the vanishing point is not the source of representation, but its conduit<sup>26</sup> ... and as such not the beginning.

How can a vanishing point even be a beginning? Childhood never happens in a world of vanishing beginnings.

The surface perpendicular to the visual ray is seen as sucked into the endless depth of the Euclidean extension, always constant in its monotone movement, without hold, arrest, or obstacle. In receding, the surface rakes over everything that it encounters in its path, cleansing the space of any possible reality. The latter seems to rush headlong along the tracks of non-being, along the lines of escape until it reaches the point, that is, until the fullness and diversity that fill the space concentrate in a zero – a homogeneous and isotropic space, beyond quality, and indifferent to its own content, remains empty, and in turn, transforms into a pure zero.<sup>27</sup>

Florensky finds no hesitation to call linear perspective, the technology for the annihilation of reality, an infernal yawn. Reverse perspective, on the other hand, he associates it with a spring, a cascading reality into the world, spurting from non-being. Point of darkness and point of light, such is the correlation of the centres of linear and inverse perspectives, a robust echo of the ancient Upanishadic dictum:

*Lead me from illusion to reality.*  
*Lead me from darkness to light.*  
*Lead me from death to immortality.*

In a reversed perspectival mentality every identity is transient, changeable and in flux. It is thought that there are clear-cut identities, distinct identities especially as designated nominally with words. But words themselves are illusory creatures. Like light to a mirage, language is vaporous and in the final analysis ineffable. What we hold to be beautiful depends on what we silently believe to be ugly. Words and things, signifiers and signifieds, cannot but be from divergent, indeed conflicting sources. In turn signifieds are born from that metaphor, that nameless chaos, amorphic, indeterminate and dark...*the signified of signifieds*. Metaphysics calls it nothingness, the absolute, and the shaman, and the mystic asymptotically breeze through its reality in their ecstatic flights of trance. Indeed Zen typically admonishes and advocates diffidence in view of the attempts at expressing such reversals.

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 93.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

*Regrettably, laments Pavel Florensky, open minds have seemingly become rare in this our age of perspectivistic tunnel vision.*

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