

## REVERSE PERSPECTIVE

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May 14, 2017

I dreamt of Pavel Florensky, black-bearded, white-robed, scrunched and sharpened face, quizzical eyes, stepping into a dark classroom, eerie light in a still shaft from the rain-battered skylight above, unblinking student cadets in drab soviet uniforms arranged in the dark like a monotonous phalanx of the state. He walks quietly to the front of the room, a point of white stepping into the brightness, and wheels around to face his students, careless of the fact that he represents the world they will work to bury the memory of. Ignorant of the fact that he's lucky to be alive, that the world he is teaching will soon kill him. His dark, small eyes are piercing with love and judgment.

I have taken lately to afternoons in the green grassy hills of Pennsylvania, reading Florensky on the rolling blankets of grass and tame, edenic groves of trees. It's an almost insufferable tameness and order. I think it would be stifling were it not for the playful breeze that alone in all the landscape is unpredictable.

I have taken to reading what he wrote about icons. They cannot, he argues, be judged along the same lines as modern art. Their purpose is different. Their context is different. Placed in a museum on flat walls, in soft, bright light, they appear primitive, careless, unrealistic, otherworldly (and not in the appealing sense). Their value is reduced to symbolism and technique—historical artifacts no longer the proper avenue for the provoking thought or the exploration of the soul. We must resist the resignation of our memory to mere archaeology, mere analysis.

For Florensky, the key to understanding icons is their reverse, or Byzantine, perspective. It's simple, when you visualize it. There are three

aspects to any painting that work as trinity to create the sensation of a single thing, of which the viewer is a part, in which viewers can lose themselves. There is the object of the painting, the viewer, and the screen (or visual plane) upon which the shadows of reality are cast. In Renaissance painting, as in photography, the layout is straightforward: the plane (which vanishes) is the two-dimensional object itself, paint on canvas, ink on paper. The subject is before the plane, the object behind it. This creates the sense that the viewer is looking down a rectangular tunnel, which narrows in the distance until it becomes but a point at the center of the painting. Thus, two trees of exactly the same height and in line with one another will appear beside each other, the one farthest from the viewer will be smaller and closer to the center of the painting. This type of perspective draws the viewers out of themselves, lets them enlarge themselves, magnifies the operations of light and color on the two-dimensional plane not only of the painting itself, but of the retina, which becomes like the painting and transmits the painting to the brain. All very nice and comfortable, which is why few things are as pleasant as looking at a renaissance or realist work of art in a museum on a gloomy May Saturday.

Byzantine perspective works very differently. The screen or visual plane is placed behind the object of the painting. Think of the non-descript infinity of gold that surrounds every seraphic angel or Virgin Mary in every medieval work of art you've ever seen. The frame, the lines—they converge not in the distance of the painting, but stretch out of the painting; they converge upon you. Thus, two trees directly in a line and of exactly the same height will appear very strange, with the farthest tree being closer to the frame, perhaps slightly larger. Distant space expands, close-up space contracts. This creates a sort of ethereal multi-dimensionality to the object of the painting, as though you were seeing the thing from multiple angles at once. It is not a familiar or comfortable perspective, but neither does it cause the object to appear

misshapen or amorphous. The object the painting seems intently focused upon the viewer, pointed at them, almost menacingly. Art lovers rarely spend gloomy May Saturdays in the iconography section of a museum.

For Florensky, context is critical. We pass by the various Theotokoses and Ascensions of the museums on our weekend strolls because, in harsh light on a flat wall, they seem primitive, combative, blunt.

But in the proper context, with the proper viewer, they come to life. Instead of as an image in a textbook or a painting hung from the bare walls of a museum, we must imagine the icon in its natural home, in the circular domed space of a sanctuary, dark and filled with still clouds of incense, pierced here and there by shafts of sunlight, color and gold, deep and rich, glowing and glimmering in the light of a few dim flickering candles, all swirling with the deep elegant strains of the cantor in his shimmering robes of silver. We must imagine the worshipper, a humble peasant woman, a babushka in her scarf, in the midst of this place, forgetting the world outside—the walls are her world now, the light. All around her are the faces of angels and saints, of the Theotokos, of the Savior, and no matter where she quietly steps, their eyes follow her, full of judgment and love, their faces emotionless and stoic. All of the perspective lines come out of the icons, converge on her, and being suddenly at the center of it all, she feels small, crippled with awe, reminded in this small and holy place of the angelic, transcendental world, which shines and expands beyond the third dimension in all directions around her. It becomes an expansive space, not one that can be photographed or painted, space itself become playful, dynamic, disorienting, humbling. The irony here is that, when all points converge upon the viewer, the space around the viewer becomes more expansive, the viewer becomes smaller, humbler. She senses that the world around her is suddenly much larger than it is, and that all this flowering expanse of space, filled with the faces of those she worships and emulates, is focused precisely, intently on her, watching her carefully, opening up around her, flowering as she crosses herself, lights a candle, prays silently, is with God. The sacred

eyes follow her movements around the cavernous space. It is a crippling blow of awe and reverence, which, of course, is precisely the point.

This insight haunted me—that when all lines converge on me, my world is bigger, more awe-inspiring, more humbling, and that I myself am just an infinitely small point where all these gazes of love and judgment converge. It is first unsettling and then comforting to know that the whole world is outside of me, and that, had I the vision of God—not manipulated into the two-dimensional frame of my retina, but with the viewing plane behind the things themselves, I could see them in three-dimensions, I could see them almost as they are in-themselves, I could realize the ways in which they are focused upon me and outside of me. The world becomes more communicative, more independent, more complex. This, Florensky says, is precisely the point.

On a weekend trip to Washington DC, I determined I had to investigate this sensation.

St. Nicholas Orthodox Cathedral was filled with the smoke of incense, bringing a strange life, a strange vitality to the shimmering halos on the icons and murals of saints that cover every inch of the place. It's a vertical structure, small and crowded with icons and flowers and candles, soaring up into the dome, to the Savior painted, his face a sort of emotionless serenity that, years ago, I would have mistaken for being intimidating and lifeless, but now I see as merciful, sublime.

The chants of the priests and deacons in their flowing silver robes rang and echoed through the dome, around the pillars, and the sounds could have been coming from any of the hundreds of holy, emotionless faces all around, and the Bishop in his crown went through the liturgy solemnly, and the women in their veils stood listening reverently, unaware of their beauty as the light from the windows through the incense haze lit the outline of their faces and scarves brilliantly.

All was a swirl of color and light and darkness and the smell of frankincense and the millennia-old chants and a sacredness impenetrable to me, and I lit a candle before the icon of the Theotokos and

crossed myself, kissed the feet of the Christ-child she bore, and quietly slid out between the worshippers to the door before the communion was brought forth from behind the iconostasis and distributed to the waiting people of God.

It's true, I thought, standing there by the column farthest from the iconostasis and the altar. This building is small from the outside, certainly nothing compared to the Greek Orthodox Cathedral up the way, or the National Cathedral crowning the hill just farther. But inside, the world expands outward—every inch is covered in richly, darkly painted icons and murals, and they all open up a world, throwing the viewing plane back farther, the strange, amorphous, unrealistic sacred figures highlighting the optical illusion, and because of this illusion one gets the sense that they can never quite escape the sacred eyes peering down stoically from every corner of the dome, the archways, the pillars, the walls, the dark multifarious corners and behind the brilliantly lit screens of still incense sunlit from the tall narrow windows. I felt small, at the center of it all. I felt small, in the gaze of so many bearded holy men and angels haloed in the every corner of this timeless world of dynamic space. I felt I was in the presence of God.



Reverse perspective is new to me. I'm so used to being the observer, sitting in rational judgment of the world arrayed around me, not being the focus of any gaze, not being the center of any perspective. My whole time as a Mormon I conducted myself as an anthropologist, trying to repress the emotional reactions, the messy entanglement, the meddlesome communitarianism of it all. It all seemed so straightforward to me. Almost brutally so, in fact. Legalistic. Square. I found myself in a foreign culture and survived by taking things at face value, building a fiction that Mormonism, for some odd historical or sociological reason, could actually be taken at face value.

And then things fell apart, and it became obvious I was no longer wanted, so I left, just casually walked on like a visitor to a museum who comes across a painting she can no longer decipher.

After St. Nicholas, I decided to go to my old ward in Friendship Heights. I had been there, so long ago, when the labyrinth of my soul became a graveyard, and then a storm, and it felt like the whole world was a high-pressure system inside of me waiting but unable to explode. I cried a lot then, and don't remember much of what I saw or heard except that it all seemed fake, like a painting with too much grey.

I had driven from the Cathedral to the ward building so automatically, so focused on the sensory high of that sacred place, that it wasn't until walking in the foyer that I realized that this was my first time back at Sacramento meeting since things with the Church had fallen apart.

I stepped into the chapel, trying to avoid some of the familiar people from my old days in the ward. Light flowed here, too, but there was a fresh crispness, the lack of incense and icons, the lack of centuries, just the bright optimism of a young single adult ward in a young, single, adolescent church.

It was a beautiful day and sunlight flowed through the big windows, catching every little particle in the air and making the whole front of the room playful with light. The people all around were chatting and laughing, hugging and smiling in their bright-colored Easter-season church clothes. No one noticed me or the smell of nicotine on me. I used to stress over whether I would be greeted and welcomed at church, but this time no such angst or worry arose. I was happy to see them, these bright and wonderful people, and their simple, happy way.

The stake president was there, and as people shuffled in, bid everyone to sit next to someone so no one sat alone, but no one sat next to me, and I alone was alone, which I was grateful for. There was a time when I would have been upset, distressed at the thought that, for all my sacrifices to the church, no one could bring themselves to sit near me, to make a little conversation, try to be pleasant. This time, though, I didn't care.

I was happy to observe, I preferred sitting alone, not because I wanted distance from these lovely, friendly people, but because I didn't want small talk to distract me from the taste of this place, the familiarity of the smells, the sounds, the play of light on hair and faces and pews and walls.

My old bishop, Bishop Gibbons, was on the stand as a new member of the stake presidency. It was he to whom I had confessed that fatal sin of smoking, he who had threatened me with excommunication, he who had ignored my insane pleas for help as I realized I was sinking, sinking, away from the light, he to whom I had thrust up my hand, he who had ignored it. I felt very big then, and very damned, as though the entire world were a storm brewing in the high-pressure system of my mind and my heart. He shut me up and compressed me, reminding me of all my sins, asking how I could be so stupid and selfish, refusing to give me a calling, pointing out the smell of cigarettes on my Carhartt on those days when I went about the promethean task of silencing my angst enough to make it to Sacrament meeting. He pushed me so far inside myself I popped, and one day I walked up to him and handed him my letter, the mercy-killing of my Mormonism, and left him stunned at the pulpit as I walked calmly outside and sat on the grass and tried to cry but could not. There was a time when I couldn't stand to be in the same room as Bishop Gibbons, so existential was the threat he posed to the Mormonism that I carried precious and guarded within me. There was a time when I would have walked out of the room right then, or else glared at him the whole time. As it happened, I glanced quickly at him, chatting to the stake president sitting next to him, shrugged a little, and kept looking around.

My older bishop, Bishop Dickie, was on the stand, still a bishop in the ward after all these years. He always seemed to me a great fountain of freshness and compassion. He was being released. It was he who had cried with me, before the smoking, before Bishop Gibbons, when things had begun to fall apart. It was the only time in that period that I sensed something outside of me was focused on me. It was the only time I

could see how my storm was spilling over, and seeing that released some of the pressure for a moment, allowed me to breathe knowing I wasn't completely alone. It was he who had remembered my name, and said hello to me those few occasions when, hungover and depressed, I had dragged myself to church. It was he who had pretended never to notice that I was hungover, he who alone seemed aware of how depressed I was. I tried to make eye contact, but he too was rapt in the conversation with another of the men on the stand.

He choked back tears as he tried to tell the congregation how much he loved them, how much had valued the sacred moments when we young people had shared our pains and our hopes with him. He was, for the first time I had ever seen him so, serious and sad-looking. The light made a halo of his grey hair, shone the tears welling in his eyes, and he stood there at the stand, in the sunlight, in the midst of the ward, and he was saintly and beautiful.

Bishop Gibbons glowered at me as he saw me refuse the sacrament, but I ignored him, suddenly cognizant of the straining of the muscles in my face. I was surprised at how little indignance I felt, how little anguish, as though now he were just some silly child with his silly conceptions of morality, and that none of it was worth me distracting myself from the beauty of the sacrament, the beauty of the congregation, the tantalizing taste of home I was being granted for a brief moment only. There is nothing he can do to me now.

It was Mother's Day. A girl from the ward got up and said such beautiful things about mothers and motherhood, about family and community, about the gospel of love. I remembered, as I always remember, the late nights, my mom realizing the futility of trying to stop me from joining the church, realizing that she was losing me. I remembered, as I always remember, the swiftness with which the conclusion came, that I would embark on this journey of life alone, utterly alone, and my months of wondering whether it was hard for her, whether she too was sleepless, whether she too felt that lump of death welling up at the top of



her chest, or if it was as easy and logical for her as it had appeared. But this time remembering all of those things did not bring angst or anger, grief or anguish, but only a soft sadness that lay over the beauty of the day and the beauty of the words like a white lace covering, accentuating them. The words spoken were really so beautiful, and the people in the congregation so silent. The backs of their heads were still and attentive, the focus of the congregation sharp and unwavering, and though I could see very few faces, I could sense that the room was filled with soft, angelic smiles.

After the sacrament meeting had ended, I went up to Bishop Dickey.

“Do you remember me?”

“Of course I remember you!” he said, as though I were his child and it would be ludicrous to imagine him forgetting me ever.

“I didn’t know this would be happening today, but I’m glad I get to be here and thank you for everything you did for me.”

“Neil, I was worried about you when you left. You were in such a hard place, such a dark place. It brought me so much joy to see you here today,” he said, cracking a warm and serious smile. “How are you?”

There was so much I could say, so much I could tell him, so many images of dark nights, cigarette after cigarette, the shining stream of liquor into glass after glass after glass, so many flesh-rolling nights of lust and lonesomeness with strangers, so many hours spent running, running, driving down the abandoned highways of America looking for a way out, wheels under feet rolling into the night, and the final daylight of San Francisco when I had fallen and realized at last that my Mormonism had died, that I must acknowledge its death, that it was a home, but one not built for me, that no matter how hard I tried, there was a fatal flaw and it just wouldn’t work, not this time.

“I’m doing fine,” I said slowly, tentatively, as though just saying it could destroy the fragile seed of truth in it. “I’m doing just fine,” I said, smiling.

How strange, this reverse perspective of mine; a few saintly gazes on the vanishing point I have become. How expansive the world, full and dynamic, no more taking space and perspective for granted. This is how the dead must feel, the storm of existential crisis having finally blown away, and being dissipated, left only to see the world in its beauty and splendor, to tenderly bless it. True, I lost God when I lost the dark stage in my mind, set for a stormy tragedy. True, I lost my only real traveling companion, and noticed Him most keenly only when He left me. But this strange world I find myself in is a bright one. There's a freshness to it, a calm, and I cannot help but think that in the flowering of the world outside me God lingers, waiting to be found, waiting for the reunion when I at last have become nothing and am ready once again to listen, simply listen, and appreciate the Word, which flows like living water from the seams of this effulgent world.

I walked outside and was blinded by the flood of light. The whole world was the quiet neighborhood before me, another sun-drenched Sunday, the trees and sunlight and grassy lawns and light playing on the surface, in the depths of it all. A beautiful world unfocused, flowing airily around me. I could still hear singing and laughing from the foyer and the classrooms. Sunlight was flowing white and golden through the trees. The flowers were blooming and smelled like heaven. The birds flitted here and there. They were singing.

The sun burned warm and comfortable on my face, dried the quiet and peaceful tears from my cheek and my jaw. I felt small in that moment, and safe.

The whole world is outside of me.

I'll be just fine on my own.

I always have been.