

Pavel Florensky: A Postmodernist Vision of Renaissance Art?

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MOST REPRESENTATIVES of Russian religious thought at the beginning of the century are unknown to the Western public. At least such is the case with the priest Pavel Florensky (1882-1943), a philosopher and cultural historian. He lived a tragic life, dying in one of Stalin's camps, and only recently have books about his life and work started to be published. Florensky is perhaps best described as an "artistic slavophile," meaning that his Slavic ethnocentricity centered around art. For him, the difference between the West and Russia manifested itself primarily in the realm of art. Florensky saw in Renaissance art, the art of the West, the degeneration of Western civilization, while in Russian art, especially its icons, he saw the embodiment of the benign characteristics of Russian civilization, which because of its religious underpinnings he regarded as superior to secular Western culture. An understanding of his philosophy is important because it provides a background for understanding the cultural and political events taking place in today's increasingly nationalist Russia.

Florensky's vision of art is postmodern

in its nature, if the postmodern can be roughly defined as a critique of modernity and the Renaissance as marking the dawn of the modern era. Postmodern epistemology, of course, favors a more irrational approach and has often been critical of rationalist thought. While irrationalism is an essential element of postmodernist philosophy, it is hardly its only manifestation. Indeed, another important trend in postmodernist epistemology is the discarding of the stress on the necessity for empirical verification in research. There are both irrational tendencies and a strong anti-empirical strain in Florensky's work, and they are evinced in his negative approach to Renaissance art.

His criticism of the Renaissance (actually modern Western civilization) was based on a general philosophical stance. According to his view, the world actually had two dimensions: the world of transient phenomena and the "real" world of ideas, *i.e.*, "celestial Jerusalem" which would be finally established on earth. The goal of human life was to uphold this world of ideas and collaborate with God in facilitating the final triumph of the "celestial Jerusalem." The aim of the artist was to open a window onto the celestial world, not the world of phenomena.

Florensky stated that reducing the

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goal of art to the simple presentation of terrestrial man implicitly denies the existence of the world of ideas, making the world of phenomena the only reality. This rejection of the celestial world implied a certain way of behavior—sensual, individualistic, and immoral. In such a world, the individual forsakes the immortality of the soul (directly connected with the existence of the celestial world) and attempts to spend his life on earth as pleasantly as possible.

Florensky's bipolar philosophy demands that the artist present reality in a certain way. The artist must discard linear perspective, which is merely a direct presentation of the phenomenological world, and stress the celestial world. Florensky argued that the absence of linear perspective in such a case is not a sign of primitivism and underdevelopment, but rather is an important ideological message, demonstrating a particular artistic and hence cultural orientation to the celestial world. In his foremost article on this subject, he wrote:

Our thesis...is that in those historical periods of artistic creativity when [artists] do not employ perspective, artists do not employ it because they *do not* know how to use it, but because they do not want to employ it, or more precisely, wish to employ another way of presentation different from that of perspective; and wish this because the genius of the time understands, and feels the world in a way which immanently includes this way of depiction.¹

In this same article, he elaborates the point in another way. Premodern art, he writes, remains the art of children, who also do not employ perspective in their paintings "despite all the efforts of teachers to inculcate in children the rules of 'linear perspective.'" But the failure of children to recognize perspective is not "due to weak thinking, but is a special type of thinking which can enjoy various degrees of perfection, including genius,

and even overwhelmingly aspire to genius; therefore, one should acknowledge that 'inverse perspective' in the representation of the world is not unsuccessful; it is by no means a simply unsuccessful, misunderstood, underthought perspective, but rather is a specific perception of the world which one should acknowledge as a mature and independent way of depiction; one may hate it as hostile to him, but one should also not speak about it with condolence or with patronizing condescension."²

The use of linear perspective does not demonstrate the development of art to a higher stage, but rather to a change in philosophical outlook. Linear perspective rejects the existence of the "celestial world" and embraces instead the world of phenomena as the only real one. Worse, according to Florensky, it also implies an acceptance of the existential model and its stress on individualism, sensualism, immorality and cruelty. Moreover, the Renaissance was not the first time Europeans had turned away from the celestial world to the world of phenomena. Hellenisticism could also be compared with the modern Renaissance.

Florensky saw the Hellenistic Age (323-30 B.C.) as the beginning of the degeneration of Greek culture. This was in sharp contrast to classical Greece, which was absorbed with the world of ideas, and "reverse perspective" was foreign to its culture. Praising classical Greek artists, Florensky wrote:

[I]t is a matter of fact that perspective was at least known in Greece in the fifth century B.C.; and if in this case or that case it was not employed, it was not because of ignorance, but because of more profound reasons rooted in the greater exigencies of pure art.³

However, by the beginning of the Hellenistic Age, Greek society was in a deep crisis, resulting from its changing val-

ues. Greeks had come to the conclusion that "life is only a spectacle, not a heroic act" and this marked the transition of Greek society from classical to Hellenisticism, for Florensky a type of ancient Renaissance. He describes this society's life as starting "to flow along the shallow waters of frivolous epicureanism, in the bourgeoisie milieu of Greek mobsters [*chelovechkov—orgraeculorem* as they were called by contemporary Romans] who lost the noumenal depth of Greek genius."⁴ As a result of these changes in life-style, art changed accordingly. It moved away from the presentation of the world of ideas as its main goal and turned to the transient world of phenomena. Consequently, the "primitivism" in classical art was abandoned and art became naturalistic. Describing this art in a manner that in another context would be praise, a disgusted Florensky pointed out that "some details are presented with such naturalism that the spectator can find deception only by touching them."⁵

He believed that the Renaissance degeneration of Hellenistic civilization was temporarily checked by Roman culture and the Middle Ages, only to succumb to a new degeneration—the modern Renaissance, an event that marked the final shaping of Western civilization with all its negative qualities. According to Florensky, the

Renaissance culture is eclectic and contradictory in its very essence; it is analytically fractional, composed from struggling elements, each of which strives after its own independence. The situation with art is absolutely the same. It sustains itself in its denial of the theocratic wholeness of life by the sap of its medieval roots; and if it uprooted itself completely from the tradition nourishing it, it would lead to its complete self-destruction.⁶

Florensky elaborates on this statement by saying that what he means by the "denial of theocratic wholeness" and

"analytically fractional character" in Renaissance art is the shifting of focus from addressing the world of ideas (which he considered the "real" world) to the world of phenomena (the "unreal" or transient world). He adds that

Since the time of the Renaissance, the religious paintings of the West have been nothing but an artistic lie, teaching the truthfulness of depictual reality. Painters, not having anything to do with the realities which they pretended and dared to present, paid no attention to the scanty indications of the iconographic, *i.e.*, knowledge about the celestial world which was given to them by the Catholic Church.⁷

These changes in general philosophical outlook had immediate repercussions on the style of painting—linear perspective and realism supplanted the symbolic "primitivism" of the Middle Ages. Artists also changed the materials that they used to create their art. Canvas supplanted stone, the symbol of the eternity of the world of ideas; colors became "sensually rich." Florensky also thought the disappearance of sheet gold in Renaissance art was a matter of great importance, as gold had always been used in icons to demonstrate heaven. Florensky wrote that the

Renaissance artist and the entire culture which followed [the Renaissance] maybe does not think about these matters and he [the Renaissance artist] does not think about these matters by collective reason, by the reason of the culture itself; [instead they] think very much about the transient character of everything, about the necessity to put forward the idea that the ontological intelligence of things [was] replaced in the world view of this period by this phenomenological sensuality, which consequently implies that man, who, having perceived himself as being unontological [*neontologicheskim*], transient and phenomenal, naturally should govern and dominate this world of metaphysical phantoms.⁸

The transition from Medieval art to Renaissance art, then, meant a new approach to life for Western civilization. As had been the case with Hellenisticism, individualism, sensualism, and the desire for domination became the very essence of European culture. This degeneration started as early as the fourteenth century with Giotto di Bondone, who, according to Florensky, was the first representative of Renaissance art and its approach to life. One could already see in his paintings an element of naturalism and, therefore, perspective. The painter also adopted a modern lifestyle, forsaking piety and often going so far as to mock religion.

However, for Florensky, Leonardo da Vinci was the real Renaissance man. There was no room for "celestial Jerusalem" in his paintings, and they focused exclusively on the terrestrial world. In his attempt to show the world as it really existed, da Vinci had consciously labored to put down "celestial Jerusalem" (from heaven to earth), and by doing so had actually eliminated the celestial world from his art. Da Vinci's *Last Supper* had aimed "to eliminate spacial demarcation of that evangelical world and this terrestrial one, to present Christ as having only a special value and not a special reality."⁹ This scene, Florensky argues, is "nothing but a continuation of the space of the room...."¹⁰ Instead of reality, we see only a "visible phenomenon; and we look, as if in a crack, coldly and with curiosity, with no awe, pity, or even the pathos of separation."¹¹

The Northern Renaissance developed along the same lines as the Italian Renaissance, for according to Florensky, Rembrandt's paintings manifested a "self-adoration for the world" and Ruben's paintings were nothing but "self-illuminations of heavy and massive flesh."¹² Their naturalism was an implicit denial of the existence of "celes-

tial Jerusalem" and necessitated a model of life quite different from the life of Medieval man. Florensky stated that, from this point on, life was no longer viewed as a service with an implicit self-effacement, but rather as something to be enjoyed. The subsequent assertion of human ego, which was a logical consequence of naturalism and individualism, thus became the central element of European culture from the Renaissance to the present.

Florensky saw individualism as the backbone of all European existence, and he regarded Hegel as the main proponent of subjectivity. Individualism, with its stress on self-assertion, also implied that the individual would attempt to impose his will upon the world, which in turn led to the violent urges that infested all of Europe. Florensky contrasted Western Renaissance culture sharply to that of Russia and its rejection of perspective. The cultural backbone of Russia was the "celestial world" and a self-effacing collectivism that contrasted sharply with the shallow individualism of Westerners. Though Florensky saw Russia's spiritual wholesomeness as rooted in the traditions of classical Greece, he felt that it could be traced back to such regimes of the past as ancient Egypt, late Rome, and the Byzantine Empire.

He regarded Egypt as one of the greatest civilizations in the history of mankind because he saw its culture as being totally oriented to the world of ideas rather than transient phenomena. The fact that Egyptians totally ignored perspective clearly demonstrated the benign characteristics of Egyptian culture. Discarding the notion that Egyptian art was somehow primitive, Florensky stated that instead it demonstrated "maturity" and even "overmaturity," for it had abandoned the principle of linear perspective for the sake of "religious objectivity and superpersonal metaphysics"¹³ and was tightly bound to a death

cult which stressed man's transition from the world of phenomena to the eternal world of ideas, the domain of God. He wrote that the "deceased one, having received God into himself, albeit retaining his individuality, became an image of God—the ideal image of his own humanity, the idea of himself, his own spiritual essence."¹⁴ Florensky greatly appreciated this death-oriented art and saw Egypt as the place where the "icon was born."¹⁵

Rome, especially late Rome, was Russia's other spiritual father. Florensky praised Rome for its "moral-political thought," seeing it as "grandiose in its space and universal in its scope."¹⁶ Florensky wrote that while Greek culture, despite its original wholesomeness, degenerated into Hellenisticism, Roman culture grew more benign over the course of its history. From this perspective, he viewed the late Roman Empire, and especially the Byzantine Empire, as the peak of Roman culture. In his view, the cultural and, implicitly, social progress of the Roman Empire paralleled the disappearance of perspective in art.

By the beginning of the fourth century A.D., illusionism was in decay and "perspectival spatiality" disappeared from paintings. One can see an apparent disregard of the rules of perspective, lack of attention to proportions between particular objects, and even their particular parts. The decay of these late classical paintings (perspectival at root) went on with extreme speed and deepened with each century up to the early Renaissance.¹⁷

Russian culture was suffused with the "best heritage of the Byzantines" and had been nurtured by the cultural traditions of classical Greece, as well as the ancient Orient.¹⁸ According to Florensky, the Orthodox icon embodied Russian culture, and "the Russian icons of the fourteenth through fifteenth centuries are absolute perfections of presentation, equal to and even beyond what is known

in the history of the world..."¹⁹ And even though the art of the ancient Orient (*i.e.*, Egyptian and late Roman art) embraced the meaning of the world, Russian art bore witness to the "celestial Jerusalem" and its final triumph over the earth. "The icon is the image of future time..., it allows one to jump through time and see, even if haltingly, the 'fortune telling mirror'—the future see."²⁰ This centering around "celestial Jerusalem" implied, as was the case with Oriental and late Roman cultures, self-effacement for the common good.

Florensky's philosophy was based on an absolute denial of the Renaissance, and subsequently the modern West with its naturalism and individualism, asserting that Russian culture was nurtured by the traditions of the Orient and late Roman and Byzantine Empires. In his analysis of culture, Florensky put forward the important idea that each cultural phenomenon can be understood only in its relationship to another. This idea can also be applied to Florensky's own ideas, whose real meaning and importance can only be properly understood in the context of Western European and contemporary Russian culture. Here, one can see that, while his ideas are at odds with modern European thought, they fit into intellectual processes within contemporary Russia.

Some contemporary Western scholars do not share Jacob Burckhardt's glamorous vision of the Renaissance in its totality. In their view, Renaissance society was often run by a powerful and despotic elite. Individuals' freedoms were restricted by political and economic considerations, or sometimes by the arbitrary whim of a ruling group.²¹ Today the Renaissance is often criticized for its lack of freedom, rather than praised for the freedoms which Florensky attributed to it. Nevertheless, Western scholars in general praise the Renaissance and view it as a great time for the artist,

at least in comparison to other periods. Florensky's vision hardly fits into the overall picture of the Renaissance and perhaps explains why his views on the period, despite their originality and exotic flavor, are barely known to many Renaissance scholars in the West. This is not the case in Russia, however, where his ideas have influenced generations of Russian intellectuals. In Russia, unlike the West, discussions of the distant past are closely related to society's contemporary problems. From this point of view, Russian intellectuals' approach to the Renaissance deserves special attention.²²

Since Stalin's rise to power, especially after the purges of the 1930s, scores of Russian intellectuals have tried to explain the nature of the Bolshevik regime and what cultural traditions facilitated its emergence. In this respect, two explanations have prevailed. Some intellectuals have seen the Soviet regime as a perpetuation of Russian historical tradition with its semi-Asiatic, pre-modern traits (*i.e.*, a despotic government and suppression of the individual). This point of view is shared by many Western historians who have implied that the Westernization (read democratization) of Russia would be the solution. In this context, the Renaissance was praised by Russian intellectuals as a period that liberated people, especially artists, from societal control.²³ Although this was generally regarded as desirable for Russia, this particular view of the Renaissance was often challenged by another approach. Its representatives included Leon Trotsky, who viewed immorality and cruelty as the essence of Renaissance culture and compared Stalin with Cesare Borgia and his secret police with the Inquisition. This analogy was accepted by Stalin himself.²⁴

While comparisons between Stalin's Russia and European societies at the time of the Renaissance and Reformation were frequent in the 1930s, it was

only those with the strongest religious and nationalistic feelings who dared to compare Stalin's "Renaissance" to Western culture.²⁵ Florensky was among them. In spite of his arrest and subsequent death in a prison camp, his ideas would not fall into oblivion and were shared by refined intellectuals of the pre-revolutionary mold. Alexander F. Losev, a philosopher and cultural historian,²⁶ was among these intellectuals. Although his vision of the Renaissance was shaped during the 1920s and 1930s, Losev, who died in 1988, was unable to express his views on the topic until later in his life. In his *Renaissance Esthetic* (1978) Losev, while not sharing Florensky's view totally, saw in the Renaissance the same germ of individualism, which he too related to immorality and cruelty.²⁷ His work implicitly evoked Florensky's experience.²⁸ Apparently because of censorship considerations, Losev called the degeneration of Renaissance culture, with its final break with religion, "Platonism." He saw Renaissance culture's unrestricted individualism as the essence of European culture.

Under Gorbachev's and Yeltsin's rule the slackening of government control has given various representatives of different ideological trends the ability to present their point of view. Russian nationalists who believed that Western influence was one of the main reasons for Russia's misfortunes became popular. One of the most erudite among these intellectuals was perhaps Losev, who, never a part of the Soviet scientific establishment, found himself gaining prestige and praise just before his death. His negative evaluation of the Renaissance in an openly nationalistic context (which made him sound quite close to Florensky) was quoted with complete approval in the pages of the nationalistic magazine *Moscow (Moskva)*, in which he related Russia's numerous problems to the pernicious influence of the West.

It is easy to understand, then, why Florensky is quite interesting for the modern reader. His ideas not only present a new and original vision of

modern and pre-modern European culture, but also play an important role in contemporary Russia's cultural and political development.

1. Priest Pavel Florensky, *U Vodrazdelov Mysli: Stat'i po iskusstvu*, ed. N. A. Struve, Vol. 1 (Paris, 1985), 138. 2. *Ibid.*, 139-140. 3. *Ibid.*, 128. 4. *Ibid.* 5. *Ibid.*, 130. 6. *Ibid.*, 299. 7. *Ibid.*, 224-225. 8. *Ibid.* 260. 9. *Ibid.*, 148. 10. *Ibid.* 11. *Ibid.*, 149. 12. *Ibid.*, 301. 13. *Ibid.*, 125. 14. *Ibid.*, 312. 15. *Ibid.*, 311. 16. *Ibid.*, 129. 17. *Ibid.*, 132. 18. *Ibid.*, 115. 19. *Ibid.*, 242. 20. *Ibid.*, 271. 21. John R. Hale, *Renaissance Venice* (Ottawa, 1973), 19. 22. The study of the Renaissance has a long tradition in Russia with well-known scholars engaged in writing on the subject as early as the end of the nineteenth century. See, for example: N.I. Kareev, *Ital'ianskii gumanizm i ego istorioizrafiia* (St. Petersburg, 1897). 23. Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. by Helene Iswolsky (Cambridge, Mass., 1968); Leonid M. Batkin, *Ital'ianskie gumanisty: Stil'zhizni i stil'myshleniia*, (Moscow, 1978) 24. In Grey, *Stalin: Man of History* (Garden City, 1979), xvi; Roy A. Medvedev, *On Stalin and Stalinism*, trans. by Ellen de Kadt (Oxford, New York, Toronto, Melbourne, 1979), 392-93; No author, "Moskovskii Protsees—Protsees nad

Oktiabr'em," *Biliuten' Opozitsii*, N52-53, 1936, 3; Trotsky Archive, T-4434, 3; *Ibid.*, T-3888, 17; *Ibid.*, T-4166, (2 of 2), 8; *Ibid.*, T-4304; *Ibid.*, T-3272; Leonid Trotsky, *Stalin: An Appraisal of the Man and his Influence*, ed. and trans. from the Russian by Charles Malamutu (New York and London, 1941), xii-xiii. 25. Those who did not share these strong religious or nationalistic ideas did not relate the negative traits of Renaissance culture with a break from the religious culture of the Middle Ages and instead compared Stalin's repression with Medieval witch hunting (Trotsky Archive, T-3149; *Ibid.*, T-4027). 26. About Losev's biography see: Michael Hagemiester, "A. F. Losev-Duten zu Leben and Werk" in A. F. Losev, *Dialektika khudozhestvennoi Formy* (Moskva, 1927); Nachdoud Nebsteiner, *Studie von Alexander Haardt Herausigegeben und eingeleitet von Michael Hagemiester* (Munchen, 1983); Florensky, *U Vodrazdelov Mysli*, 26. 27. A. F. Losev, *Estetika Vozrozhdeniia* (Moscow, 1978), 131-133. 28. Ivanov-Razumnik, *Sud'by Pisatelei* (Vremiia i My, 1985), 210.

Beyond the Enlightenment

William A. Rusher

WHEN SOMEONE ASKED Chou En-lai what he thought of the Enlightenment, he is said to have replied, "It's too soon to tell." The wily old Communist was right. The intellectual Big Bang of the eighteenth century, which toppled the old Christian

order and laid the foundations of modernity, was still reverberating in the mid-twentieth, and the outcome of many of the major trends emerging from it was still unclear.

It was far from certain, for one thing, which of the two rival politico-economic systems spawned by the Enlightenment—the one that was based on the individual, or the one that rested its

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