

Making Sense of the Sensual in Pavel Florenskii's Aesthetics: The Dialectics of Finite Being

Stephen C. Hutchings

A boundary is not that at which something stops, but . . . that from which something begins its presencing.

—Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*

Personhood is a living contradiction—between private and social, form and content, finite and infinite, freedom and fate. Personhood would be lost if the boundaries and the forms that contain it were to disappear, if it were to dissolve into cosmic infinity. But personhood would not be the image and likeness of God if it did not accommodate within itself infinite content.

—Nikolai Berdiaev, *Filosofia svobodnogo dukha*

The aesthetic . . . is the first stirrings . . . of the body's long, inarticulate rebellion against the tyranny of the theoretical.

—Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*

Sensing the End

Underpinning this essay is a conviction that, through its conception of the human body—its sense of the sensual—the work of Pavel Florenskii speaks directly to the challenges facing us in the century about to dawn. It may seem doubly perverse to make such a claim for an Orthodox priest who sought inspiration in the intense spirituality of the icon painters and who perished for his beliefs in the distant murk of Iosif Stalin's gulag—one of the abiding symbols of the century just past. What place could there be, one might object, for the priestly cassock and pre-Renaissance sensibilities of a Florenskii amidst the distinctly millennial atmosphere of the postmodern and the postindustrial? To Florenskii's apparent anachronism, runs the argument, we should add his theoretical irrelevance. Under the influence of this same millennialism, theory across the humanities has recently spawned innumerable subsets of “-isms” among whose achievements has been the growth of a veritable fin-de-siècle “body industry.” In what is both a recapitulation and a deepening of the revolt against rationalism unleashed toward the end of the last century by Sigmund Freud, Friedrich Nietzsche, and others, scholarly discourse has returned to hitherto marginalized and repressed aspects of human activity—the somatic, the gender-specific, and the sexual. Critics, philosophers, and social historians as varied as Peter Brooks, Luce Irigaray, Michel Foucault, and Jean-Luc Nancy have mounted an assault on western thought designed to show 1) the hidden influence of the body on supposedly neutral processes

(feminist exposés of “phallogocentrism”), and 2) ways in which notions of the body that we *are* willing to profess are in fact culturally coded “constructs” with their roots in power dispositions that return us to repressed bodily impulses (post-Nietzschean readings of sexuality).¹ Far from attempting to establish Florenskii's affinity to these thinkers, we might instead be tempted to include him in a list of potential analytic objects for the line of thought that they represent. With his attachment to the spiritual essences of Orthodox theology, Florenskii appears (mistakenly, I shall argue) to typify that ideologically motivated suppression of the bodily that the likes of Foucault set out to expose.²

Florenskii has yet to be subjected to a postmodern critique. Nor will such a critique be provided within the present essay, one of the aims of which is to question the foundations underlying much postmodern theory. Nonetheless, previous commentators have generally sought to confirm Florenskii's association with the transcendental mysticism to which postmodern theorists stand so resolutely opposed. Victor Terras connects him with the Platonism of Vladimir Solov'ev—a tendency for which theologians like Georges Florovskii have taken him to task.³ Among other Orthodox commentators, Sergei Khoruzhii sees Sophiology as Florenskii's main inspiration, while Robert Slesinskii (an eastern Catholic) portrays divine love as the metaphysical concept resolving the paradoxes to which his thought is prone.⁴ In a similar vein, Katerina Clark and Michael Holquist deploy him as a “monologizing” counterweight to the corporeal dialogism of Mikhail Bakhtin: “Bakhtin believed that there should be no end to becoming, and he was an enemy of all that is finished . . . [Florenskii] sought ways to make all contradictions between ‘I’ and ‘not-I’ fall away as both transcend themselves; he looked to a One that would resolve all differences.”⁵ Others restrict their interest in Florenskii to his linguistic theories, in which they discern a variation on approaches to the “inner form” of words taken by phenomenologists like Edmund Husserl, or to theological readings of the Holy Trinity in his treatise *The Pillar and Ground of the Truth*.⁶

1. For the first trend, see Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory* (London, 1985); Sneja Gunew, ed., *Feminist Knowledge: Critique and Construct* (London, 1990). Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter with Carolyn Burke (Ithaca, 1985). For the second trend, see especially Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, trans. Robert Hurky, 2 vols. (New York, 1988).

2. Florenskii's peers Vladimir Solov'ev and Nikolai Berdiaev were recently subjected to Foucauldian critique in Jane Costlow, Stephanie Sandler, and Judith Vowles, eds., *Sexuality and the Body in Russian Culture* (Stanford, 1994).

3. See Victor Terras's entry under “Florensky” in V. Terras, *The Handbook of Russian Literature* (New Haven, 1985), 138. For Florovskii's critique of Florenskii, see G. B. Florovskii, *Puti russkogo bogosloviia* (Paris, 1937), 497.

4. See S. S. Khoruzhii, “Obretenie konkretnosti,” in P. A. Florenskii, *U vodorazdelov mysli*, ed. N. F. Utkina (Moscow, 1990), 5; Robert Slesinskii, *Pavel Florensky: A Metaphysics of Love* (Crestwood, N.Y., 1984).

5. Katerina Clark and Michael Holquist, *Mikhail Bakhtin* (Cambridge, Mass., 1984), 136.

6. For the philological approach to Florenskii, see Viacheslav V. Ivanov, “O lingvističeskikh issledovaniiakh P. A. Florenskogo,” *Voprosy iazykoznaniiia*, 1988, no. 6:82–95. For

An exception to the norm is to be found in two essays by Steven Cassedy, who restores the balance in favor of a more materially oriented Florenskii.⁷ The present article builds upon Cassedy's insights, but with some modifications. Whereas for Cassedy, Florenskii's relevance is that of a thinker whose interest in the contextual leads him to the "strangely post-modern view . . . that fixed meanings do not exist in language," my contention will be that such contextualism does not preclude an embrace of final Meaning and that, rather than anticipate postmodernism, Florenskii exposes that movement's own residual ties to rational abstraction.⁸ Moreover, although he acknowledges the influence of Orthodox notions of the sanctity of matter, Cassedy concedes Florenskii's idealist mentality, implying that his incipient materialism had to await Bakhtin's joyful celebration of corporeal existence for its full realization.⁹

The reason for Cassedy's judicious hedging of bets is, I think, that he derives his understanding of sanctified matter from St. John of Damascus's veneration of Christ as a dwelling place for divine energy and grace. "The result of the incarnation," explains Cassedy "is a being who is fleshly, but who carries in him the divinity of the Father."¹⁰ He thus aligns himself with an early Christian notion of the incarnation as the "indwelling" of God in the vessel of man. This theory was opposed by proponents of the "Hypostatic Union" who held that in Christ, the Logos actually became flesh, while at the same time remaining divine. In the words of the fifth century Council of Ephesus "with his own flesh he is the one Christ, the same one simultaneously God and man." As Jaroslav Pelikan points out, the doctrine of the "indwelling" was adopted by St. Augustine and provided the basis for western denigrations of fleshly matter as corrupt.¹¹ Despite the intentions of its adherents, the theory of flesh as vessel for an active divinity reopened the door to a dualistic hierarchy in which spirit assumes precedence over matter. No wonder, then, that, for Cassedy, the importance of matter in Florenskii's thought must be seen in the context of its insistence on a "division between . . . two worlds," and that celebra-

a theological treatment, see Michael Silberer, *Die Trinitätsidee im Werk von Pavel A. Florenskij: Versuch einer systematischen Darstellung in Begegnung mit Thomas von Aquin* (Wurzburg, 1984). Richard Gustafson's introduction to the recent translation of *Stolp i utverzhdienie istiny* also gives a useful account of Florenskii as a religious thinker. See Pavel Florenskii, *The Pillar and Ground of the Truth*, trans. Boris Jakim, with an introduction by Richard Gustafson (Princeton, 1997).

7. See Steven Cassedy, "Pavel Florenskij's Philosophy of Language: Its Contextuality and Its Context," *Slavic and East European Journal* 35, no. 4 (1991): 537–52; Steven Cassedy, "P. A. Florensky and the Celebration of Matter," in Judith Deutsch Kornblatt and Richard F. Gustafson, eds., *Russian Religious Thought* (Madison, 1996), 95–109. Florenskii's "materialism" is touched upon and placed in the intellectual context of the time at which he was writing in Michael Hagemester and Nina Kauchtschischwili, eds., *P. A. Florenskii i kul'tura ego vremeni* (Marburg, 1995).

8. Cassedy, "Florenskij's Philosophy," 543, 47.

9. *Ibid.*, 550.

10. Cassedy, "P. A. Florensky," 99, 98.

11. Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*, 5 vols. (Chicago, 1971), vol. 1, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100–600)*, 261, 258.

tion of the flesh must be attenuated by its ultimate subordination to the invisible realm of God's Truth.¹²

When describing Florenskii's negotiation of the relationship between the two realms, Cassedy invokes the "indwelling" tradition to explain Florenskii's use of an antinomical logic in which privileged areas of human activity such as icon painting and language serve as points of transition displaying "varying balances of ideality and materiality." Without necessarily negating Cassedy's argument, which is based on an informed reading of Florenskii's work, I will exploit alternative textual evidence to suggest that Florenskii was equally influenced by the doctrine of Hypostatic Union, that his notion of antinomy accordingly embraces dialectical movement as well as what Cassedy calls "ontic ambiguity," and that this is reflected in a conception of material less as passive vessel for, or point of transition to, the divine, than as the site of an *interaction* between divine and human in which each is realized in its "other."¹³ For proponents of the Hypostatic Union, including St. Cyril, St. Irenaeus, and many of the eastern fathers who provided the backbone of Russian Orthodox thought, Christ enacts a state of being in which the matter/spirit problematic is altogether obviated through a dynamic exchange of idioms (or *perichoresis*) in which, to cite St. Athanasius's deification formula, "God became man, so that man might become God."

The deification doctrine owes much to St. Paul's notion of the Church as the resurrected *body* of Christ—a notion related to Florenskii's linking of *kenosis* (the process by which Christ emptied himself of his divinity) with *homoiosis* (the process by which man achieves likeness to God) in a dynamic movement of "flow and reverse flow."¹⁴ While Cassedy writes of Florenskii's version of kenosis as "a transitional stage to a higher, transfigured state," I prefer to cite David Bethea's insistence on Florenskii's negation of the very possibility that "there is or can be something in between" and his identification of Florenskii with Russian culture's habitual eschewal of a "middle space."¹⁵ The stress on mutual interdependence behind this hostility to mediation is also responsible for Florenskii's rejection of matter as static and self-equivalent in favor of what Judith Kornblatt terms "the patristic . . . assumption that . . . all entities can . . . interpenetrate through their 'energies' even as their 'essences' remain . . . intact."¹⁶ It will be a small step from here to demonstrating how, in Florenskii's dialectic, rather than opposing infinite meaning, bounded material being is the path to its attainment, just as the aesthetic idiom in which this boundedness demands to be expressed offers an answer to Cassedy's baffled ques-

12. Cassedy, "P. A. Florensky," 100.

13. *Ibid.*, 100–101.

14. P. Florenskii, *Stolp i utverzhdienie istiny*, 2 vols., ed. N. F. Utkina (Moscow, 1990), 1:138. All translations from Russian texts are my own.

15. Cassedy, "P. A. Florensky," 102; David Bethea, "Florensky and Dante: Revelation, Orthodoxy and Non-Euclidean Space," in Kornblatt and Gustafson, eds., *Russian Religious Thought*, 122–23.

16. Judith Kornblatt, "Introduction," in Kornblatt and Gustafson, eds., *Russian Religious Thought*, 8.

tion, “why, if all matter is to be venerated, . . . certain material objects, like icons, appear to possess a different mode of being from that of ordinary objects.”¹⁷

The foregoing can be summed up in the form of five interlocking theses: 1) an analysis of Florenskii’s corpus and, ultimately, his life’s trajectory, reveals sensual being as the theme that unifies its theological, mathematical, philological, and aesthetic strands; 2) this entails less a correction of the balance between sensible idea and sensual matter than a radical redefinition of the sensual; 3) far from diluting his emphasis on the concrete and the embodied, Florenskii’s interest in the finite and bounded is its very precondition, and to understand this, we must appreciate the force of his dialectics of finite and infinite; 4) the stress on the importance of creativity in establishing finite boundaries explains the privileged status accorded to aesthetics; 5) the foundations of the postmodern assault on rational abstraction are, in Florenskii’s system, themselves subsumed under the category of the abstract; therein lies his potential to transcend the dilemmas this assault brings to light.

In order to establish a point of contact between the Silver Age avatar and silicon age radicals and to begin the task of integrating the five theses, it is helpful to recall that Florenskii emerged from Russia’s own fin-de-siècle revolution against utilitarianism. In keeping with the mood this revolution generated, Florenskii was himself an eschatological thinker who, like latter-day postmodernists, has an acute sense that he is living in an era after which history as we know it will cease.¹⁸ There is a profound difference between the two eschatologies, however. For Jean Baudrillard, the end in question emerges as a consequence of the exposé of empirical, fleshly matter as a rationalistic illusion and its dissolution into a myriad subliminal charges and drives, sites of unseen power struggles or intangible, genetic codes that can be manipulated to generate a limitless, yet empty world of simulacra and “effects”:

The very illusion of the body . . . is destroyed in the simulation of the functions of life; appearances are volatilized by genetic transcription. Another vital illusion disappears: that of thought, which is abolished in the fetishism of artificial intelligence. . . . In the concentration camps . . . it was death that was exterminated. The prisoners were dispossessed of their deaths—deader than dead, disappeared. But death can also be exterminated by the creation of indestructible life processes. Which is what we are doing when we attempt to capture immortality in . . . genetic processes. . . .

Things are in a state which is . . . neither finished, nor infinite . . . but de-finitive that is, deprived of its end. Now, the feeling that goes with a definitive state . . . is melancholic . . . with melancholia . . . there are no longer any causes, but only effects.¹⁹

17. Cassedy, “P. A. Florensky,” 106.

18. David Bethea mentions Florenskii in this context in *The Shape of Apocalypse in Modern Russian Literature* (Princeton, 1989), 201–5.

19. Jean Baudrillard, *The Illusion of the End*, trans. Chris Turner (Stanford, 1994), 98, 120–21.

The end is here portrayed as an end to ends themselves. For Florenskii, whose own death in the gulag Baudrillard's reference to Nazi concentration camps unwittingly invokes, it is the very possibility of such a dissolution that constitutes an illusion, recalling, as it does, Nikolai Berdiaev's image of personhood dissolved into cosmic infinity. Such a notion derives from what both thinkers perceive as a false distinction between tangible phenomena and the invisible universals animating them—neither of which can be anything other than one of two sides of a single rationalistic coin.²⁰

Florenskii's eschatology will be shown to flow from an idea of end that was later to be echoed in Martin Heidegger's sense of boundary—that which enables a body to establish its presence in Being, rather than as the point of intersection for anonymous DNA codes or power relations (the geneticized body of modern biology; the gendered body of modern scholarly discourse), or for Euclidean spatial coordinates (the object of conventional science). His desire to establish this principle at the center of human culture furnishes a counter vision *avant la lettre* to Baudrillard's endless vacuum—a rehabilitation of sensible matter, a making sense of the sensual so as to transcend the enduring dualisms of spirit and flesh, reason and matter, and to revalorize the body in its higher sense. This is of significance to cultural theory which, judging by the nightmare of Baudrillard's universal melancholia and the continuous infighting within gender studies between “essentialists” and “constructivists,” is rapidly reaching an impasse.²¹ More important, given the inevitable ephemerality of all cultural theory, it must also have a bearing on an actuality lived out in the twin shadows of the totalitarian excesses of the past and a future beset by globalization, by increasing alienation between individuals, and by a world in ecological crisis, and among individuals destined to languish in front of screens awash with ghostly images that merely “reinforce our exile and immure us in our indifference.”²²

Running throughout Florenskii's oeuvre are two principles. One is a conception of sensual being as the point at which the barrier separating inner thought from external matter evaporates and finite sensation is converted into infinite sense. The notions of antithesis and synthesis connoted by such a conception invoke a dialectical vocabulary positing the simultaneous identity and nonidentity of body and place, self and other, space and time. This, then, is the second unifying precept. Chief among the dialectical tensions to be negotiated is the conflict of bounded and

20. Aleksei Losev, Florenskii's “pupil,” argues that both rationalism (which stresses rational essence to the detriment of phenomenal appearance) and positivism (which denies essence in deference to sensual appearance) err in “singling out from reality one layer and substantializing it”—a gesture that leads to the “absolute fragmenting of consciousness and being.” See Aleksei Losev, *Filosofia imeni* (Moscow, 1990), 857.

21. The argument is between constructivists for whom, in Sneja Gunew's words, “the male-female dichotomy is . . . a construct . . . which must be exploded” and essentialists for whom the idea of gender equivalence “reduces all specificities, including those that serve to distinguish the positions of the oppressed from those of the oppressor.” Gunew, ed., *Feminist Knowledge*, 7, 338. This is a recapitulation in contemporary terms of the spirit/matter dichotomy.

22. Baudrillard, *The Illusion*, 58.

unbounded. For if the sensual body must serve as a unit of meaning to be accorded universal value, then it must also define its contours in the time-space in which it is immersed, which must also be permitted to bear the dual traits of boundedness and infinite value. Thus the body must be delimited and mortal. There can be no being other than against the background of nonbeing—the central insight of the dialectical tradition.

The appeal of dialectical logic is explained by its efficacy as a weapon in Florenskii's life project: the struggle against abstract reason and its attendant evils. As I pursue these ramifications, the concept of body comes ever more sharply into focus. I begin with his understanding of the sensuousness of the space surrounding the body, highlighting his work on linear perspective and mathematical infinity. A sensuous space presupposes a sensing subject, and I then examine Florenskii's definition of reality as the tension of two concretely embodied entities. This leads to his theory of the body as the site at which the dialectics of sense and the sensuous unfolds. Rather than resolving mind/body dualism in favor of the latter term, however, Florenskii's celebration of the body evokes a different paradigm. Within the idiom of trinitarian theology, sensual being simultaneously embraces consciousness and bodily presence. This is because the body's mode of being is as *creative action* directed toward the world. The creative impulse thus enables aesthetics to subsume within itself both ethics and epistemology.²³ Unable to sustain this holism in an atomized world, however, Florenskii is forced to apply his synthesizing insights from within the very compartmentalized spheres of knowledge that his project is designed to overcome. This trend is exacerbated by the advent of Bolshevism, which compelled him to apply his knowledge in ever more specialized, ever more secular contexts. Ultimately, he falls victim to the very forces against which he had directed his cerebral life. But through the manner in which his fate is realized, Florenskii broaches the transcendence of inner and outer, spirit and flesh that had hitherto eluded him, assuming his place in Terry Eagleton's pantheon of aesthetic rebels against abstraction's tyranny.²⁴

The Sensuousness of the Finite: Inverse Perspective, Curved Space, Actual Infinity

With his connections to Russian symbolism, Florenskii seems to have much in common with the overarching spiritualism of which Berdiaev and Solov'ev stand accused.²⁵ Indeed, dissatisfied with the inability of his chosen

23. Florenskii's work is influenced by Gregory of Palamas, who links the ability to perceive divine light with knowledge of God's mysterious power and the enactment of his Truth. The integration of aesthetics, epistemology, and ethics is thus no contradiction for Florenskii.

24. Until recently, a shroud of mystery hung over Florenskii's final destiny, but prison records eventually confirmed that he was shot at the Solovki concentration camp in 1937. For full biographical details, see A. S. Trubachev, "Zhizn' i sud'ba," in P. Florenskii, *Sochineniia v chetyrekh tomakh* (Moscow, 1994), 1:3–34.

25. Costlow, Sandler, and Vowles write: "Berdiaev's narrative plots a history of heroic spiritual denial, finding in Russian culture an eschatological essence that grants no legiti-

disciplines to penetrate beyond superficial surfaces to spiritual essences, he abandoned the prospect of a glittering career in the sciences for a life spent propagating God's Higher Truth to a skeptical, secular world addicted to lower-order, empirical truths.²⁶ Accordingly, *The Pillar*, his first, and most influential work, was conceived as an all-embracing vindication of God against the assault of modern Reason. Florenskii's self-identity was that of a premodern, Leonardo-like figure who combined a continuing interest in theoretical mathematics and a passion for ancient aesthetics with theology and a life of devotion to the church.²⁷ The three spheres intersect in a remarkable study called "Obratnaia perspektiva" (Inverse perspective) dedicated to the problem of perspective in icon paintings, but with ramifications that reach far beyond the field of art history. It is this essay which serves as my starting point.

"Inverse Perspective" begins with an account of peculiarities in the representational structure of ancient icons. It concentrates on the flouting of the laws of linear perspective characteristic of iconographic art. Florenskii refers to the tendency of background figures to be larger than foreground figures, the nonrecognition of vanishing points and the depiction of parallel lines in rectangular objects diverging rather than converging as they meet the horizon. Much of the essay is taken up with condemning those who would explain such peculiarities by reference to the painters' inability to see "naturally."²⁸ The fact that children and certain remote tribes have, even today, to be taught to draw "in perspective," indicates that this way of seeing is as conventionalized as that of medieval painters who, for their part, often had recourse to linear perspective. The fact that these artists did not submit entirely to its laws was a matter of *choice*, not ignorance.

The choice was conditioned by the fact that medieval culture was of the "contemplative-creative" rather than the "appropriative-mechanical" type. Whereas post-Renaissance civilization posits the individual subject and the desires peculiar to it as the fulcrum of existence and therefore involves a retreat into subjectivism and self-gratification, pre-Renaissance man—the true realist—understood that "in order to desire, it is necessary first to be a reality . . . among other realities."²⁹ The corollary of this is the recognition of *other centers of being* outside the human subject, each with its own laws and its own form. The ramifications for the medieval view of space follow from here:

Nothing in existence can be considered passive, indifferent material used to fill out some or other schema. . . . And for that reason, forms must

macy to the pleasures of the world and the body. . . . His is a story that depicts and celebrates the triumph of morality and sublimation over the temptations of the flesh." Costlow, Sandler, and Vowles, eds., *Sexuality and the Body*, 10.

26. Florenskii turned down a position in the Moscow University Faculty of Mathematics and Physics in 1904 for a place at the Moscow Spiritual Academy.

27. Bethea describes Florenskii as a "true Renaissance man whom fate preserved into the Soviet period." *The Shape of Apocalypse*, 201–2.

28. See Pavel Florenskii, "Obratnaia perspektiva," in *U vodorazdelov mysli*, 43–102.

29. *Ibid.*, 60, 59.

be understood according to their own lives, portrayed through themselves, and not within the parameters of a predetermined perspective. And finally, space itself is not just a structureless, even place . . . but is itself an independent reality organized through and through, nowhere indifferent, possessing an inner coherence and structure.³⁰

Those divergent parallels and enlarged background figures are the products, not of some perspectival “blindness,” but of an effort to portray phenomena as *realities in their own right*. From within the perspective of a painterly figure positioned behind a table, rather than from that of an external observer, the table’s parallel sides will converge the *farther* they are from the horizon, not the closer they are to it.

Florenskii argues that linear perspective perpetrates a double lie. Not only are the observed phenomena deprived of their own spatio-temporal reality—turned into a static, theatrical scene imprisoned within theoretical, Euclidean space—but the viewpoint from which they are observed is also a subjectivist illusion, a nonexistent construct:

The viewer or artist is veritably chained to his theatrical bench, like a prisoner in Plato’s cave . . . he is as if separated from the stage by a glass barrier and consists of one, immobile, viewing eye, without the ability to penetrate into the essence of life and, most important, with a paralyzed will, for the very essence of . . . theater requires an involuntary gazing at the stage as at something . . . “not really there.”³¹

Linear perspective abstracts the viewed object away into nonexistence by reducing it to the function of a point in Euclidean space. It thereby simultaneously erodes the vitality of the viewing subject. In reality we see with two eyes, not one, and the image we retrieve is different from the “incorrect” image depicted within linear perspective. Moreover, the fixed coordinate posited in perspectivist painting presupposes a viewer “peering at the world through the peephole of subjective borders, lifeless and immobile, incapable of grasping movement and pretending to the divine necessity of only its . . . moment of inspection.”³² Linear perspective and the world outlook of which it is part disembodies the “independent reality” that is space, thus disembodimenting the human subject itself—a point made in “Inverse Perspective,” and again in the concluding remarks to the collection to which that essay belongs:

Perspectivism is a device necessarily deriving from a worldview in which the true basis for its half-real . . . representations is . . . some kind of subjectivity, itself deprived of reality.³³

“Point of View” is an attempt by the individual consciousness to tear itself away from . . . its own reality—from the body, from the second eye, even from the first eye inasmuch as it is not a mathematical point.³⁴

For Florenskii, the human subject cannot exist except in conjunction with that of another bodied reality, through an active engagement with that re-

30. *Ibid.*, 60.

31. *Ibid.*, 52.

32. *Ibid.*, 96, 93.

33. *Ibid.*, 93.

34. Pavel Florenskii, “Itogi”, in *U vodorazdelov mysli*, 342.

ality, a process achieved best of all in art: "Painting has as its task not to create a double of reality, but to provide a deeper understanding of its architectonics; and the understanding of this . . . material of reality . . . is given to the contemplative eye of the artist in living contact with reality, through living [*vzhivanie*] and feeling [*vchuvstvovanie*] within reality."³⁵ This process of "living within reality" requires work. Because the world outside is itself real and bodied, we must apply ourselves to it in a dynamic relationship that constitutes the essence of life: "The realistic relationship to the world . . . is a working relationship: it is life in the world. . . . Precisely because we are surrounded, not by ghostly dreams . . . reorganized according to our whims, weak and bloodless, but by a reality having its own life and its own relationship to other realities, this reality demands effort on our parts."³⁶ Work implies creativity, and creativity in its essential form is art. Thus, it is not fortuitous that Florenskii develops the core of his thinking in a study of an artistic form (the icon), for it is his conception of aesthetics as creativity which constitutes that core.

Notwithstanding Clark's and Holquist's assertions of his concern for unity, Florenskii's philosophy is permeated with "two-ness," with the idea that a body exists neither in itself nor in a vacuum placed around it, but in a second reality—a space that is itself real, bodied, with form. Florenskii's rejection of linear perspective is a rejection of space as a function of the individual subject position, and thus of space as a theoretical construct capable of being extended to infinity. Real space must be space with form, space that is able to delimit itself from the other realities in interaction with which it coexists—finite space. He pours scorn upon the position embraced by the postmedieval age: that of "the homogeneity and unboundedness of space, of its . . . formlessness and absence of individuality."³⁷ Elsewhere, he ties this idea to the mathematical concept of "actual infinity"—distinguished from abstract, theoretical infinity through the fact that, though it cannot be reached, it has real form. It is best understood as the minimally small rather than the maximally large, zero rather than infinity, ever smaller numbers measuring the ever diminishing interval between 1 and 0 rather than ever extendable projections beyond a final number. In this way, the notion of unattainability is retained. Because zero grows forever nearer, yet the distance between it and the measurer is continually diminishing, infinity is sensed as a real, resistant boundary rather than an ever receding horizon.³⁸

Another approach to actual infinity is through a revitalized pre-Copernican cosmology in which the universe consists of curved, bounded space. If the universe has form, then the space it contains must also be formed, and thus curved. Florenskii exploits this principle in his mathematical treatise *Mnimosti v geometrii* (Imaginarities in geometry) to demonstrate the validity of non-Euclidean concepts such as the possibility of con-

35. Florenskii, "Obratnaia perspektiva," 51.

36. Florenskii, "Itogi," 344.

37. Florenskii, "Obratnaia perspektiva," 59, 58.

38. Florenskii, *Stolp i utverzhdienie istiny*, 1: 493–500. Both mathematician Marvin Kantor and medieval theologian Nicholas of Cusa, who advanced actual infinity as the path to an understanding of God, influenced Florenskii's thinking.

vergent parallel lines. His ideas predate recent research into the notion of gravity as an effect of warped space, rather than as a separate force field.³⁹

The Body as Dialectic

Curved space is the necessary consequence of a reality that comes into being through the mutual reciprocity of self and other, subject and object. Space is formed and bounded, curved and real, not because it consists of hardened, empirically measurable material, but because it *lives* independently of the perceiving human subject which it envelops and to which it offers active resistance. It is therefore endowed with meaning and intentionality. Conversely, the human subject is real and alive, not because it is identical to its own self-consciousness, but because it is bounded by real outer limits through interaction with which it continually reshapes its identity. The perceiving subject cannot be understood in isolation from its embodiment in space, just as space cannot be understood outside its imbuedness with intentionality and meaning. Florenskii associates the paradox of inner self/external space subject-object relationships with dialectics, by which he means a way of conceiving reality as fluid and process-oriented rather than fixed and self-identical: "Life is the continual overthrowing of abstract self-equivalence, the constant dying away of unity. . . . In living, we commune with our selves—in space and in time—as whole organisms, we gather ourselves together out of separate elements, mutually exclusive according to the law of identity."⁴⁰

The dialectic at work throughout Florenskii's oeuvre is reflected in his philological analysis of the relationship between subject and predicate in a sentence. Thus, he dismisses the idea that when we say "this is a birch tree" we are placing a concrete, self-identical object in a theoretical vacuum (the abstract class that is the concept of birch tree) and insists that both subject (this) and predicate (birch tree) are independent ontological realities:

The predicate is taken, not as a general concept under which the subject is subsumed, but as something . . . ontologically equal to the concreteness of the subject. In outer experience . . . the reality of the subject and that of the predicate . . . are not even compatible with one another. But on the level of the inner correspondence of their beings . . . these two realities are . . . ontologically identical.⁴¹

The analytical model here is that of the trinitarianism developed in his theodicy, from which there is a direct line of continuity to the philological, mathematical, and aesthetic work of later years.⁴² When explicating

39. For gravity as an effect of warped space, see Michio Kaku, *Hyperspace: A Scientific Odyssey through Parallel Universes, Time Warps and the Tenth Dimension* (New York, 1994), 36–107.

40. Florenskii, "Itogi," 343.

41. See Florenskii, "Imeslavie kak filosofskaia predposylka," in *U vodorazdelov mysli*, 300.

42. I would question Terras's rigid delineation of a pre- and post-theodicy Florenskii. See Terras, *Handbook of Russian Literature*, 138.

the paradox of cognition—in which perceiving subject and perceived object are completely separate yet at the same time fully united—he makes reference to the “unmergedly and inseparably” (*neslianno i nerazdel'no*) formula used by the proponents of the Hypostatic Union to describe the relationship between God and Son in the Holy Trinity and between the two natures of Christ:

In the act of cognition it is impossible to divide the subject of cognition from its object: cognition is both at once. . . . In uniting, they do not subsume one another, nor, in retaining their independence, do they stay separated. The theological formula “unmergedly and inseparably” is fully applicable to the cognitional relationship of subject and object.⁴³

As Florenskii is aware, the categories of subject and object designate, not only two discrete realities (inner and outer), but also two single modes of being of a single human reality. The human being experiences himself as object through his body, and as subject through his consciousness, which he in turn relates to his inner word. It is quite consistent with the dialectical intertwining of subject and object upon which Florenskii insists in his general theory of the relationship between multiple realities that the inner and outer modes of being of the single (human) reality are subjected to the same effects. In his account of created being, Florenskii deviates from negative post-Augustinian views of man's bodily condition. He argues that created being is literally defined by the body, which should be understood, not merely as the physicality of the flesh, but as human “form” in its higher sense: “What is the body? Not the material of the human organism . . . but its form, and not the form of its external contours, but its entire structure as a whole.”⁴⁴ Referring to Gregory of Nyssa's belief that Christ was resurrected in soul *and* body and inspired by St. Paul's distinction between flesh (*sarx*) and body (*soma*), Florenskii disassociates the body from the notion of fleshly surface and equates it with the whole human being. Body as impersonal materiality (that is, as passive flesh) replaces body as active, unified personality. Remaining true to his medieval sensibility and in line with a trend reflected elsewhere in Russian philosophy, Florenskii relocates the center of the human personality away from the head (a product of the fragmentation of the body that occurred after the Renaissance), and back to the heart: “The mysticism of the church is a mysticism of the breast. But from ancient times, the center of the breast has been considered to be the heart. . . . If the breast is the focal point of the body, then the heart is the focal point of the breast.”⁴⁵

The body (and thus the heart) is not the manifestation of man's physical existence taken in abstraction from his unified being, but rather the

43. Florenskii, “Imeslavie,” 284.

44. Florenskii, *Stolp i utverzhdenie istiny*, 1:264.

45. *Ibid.*, 265, 266–67. The heart was also of seminal importance in the religious philosophy of Boris Vysheslavtsev. See, in particular, his essay “Znachenie serdtsa v filosofii i v religii,” in B. Vysheslavtsev, *Etika Preobrazhennogo Erosa* (Moscow, 1994), 271–79. The frequent exploitation by Berdiaev and, indeed, Florenskii, of the semantic link between the Russian words for the “bodily” term *face* (*litso*) and the “spiritual” term *personality* (*lichnost'*) can be viewed in the same context.

meeting point of his biological functions and his soul. For the heart is both the life-sustaining organ and the site of spiritual life. Spiritual existence equates to a heart purified by God's light and opened up to communion with a world made whole by His all-embracing Love. But since the heart is the core of the individual, it must also serve to distinguish his or her personality from that of other unique individuals, from the surrounding world, and from God. For this reason, Florenskii posits the body as border (*granitsa*) between individual and world, self and other, particular and universal:

Flowing throughout the entire personality, the light of God's love also sanctifies the body, and from there radiates forth into the nature external to the personality. Through the root by which spiritual personality departs into the heavens, divine grace sanctifies the entire surroundings of the ascetic and pours into his creaturely depths. The body, this general border between the person and other created beings, unites them as one.⁴⁶

Cassedy's discussion of borders highlights the function of "mediating objects" such as icons. But rather than mark a line *mediating* between self and other, the body as *granitsa*, which in Russian can mean "limit" (to be overcome) as well as "border" (to be straddled), furnishes the dynamic principle with which to *repudiate* the whole paradigm of dualities: self and other, subject and object, general and unique, mind and body. To give precedence to either side of the paradigm is to give precedence to the first term (subject, self, mind, and so on). The dualism entailed in self-identity is blamed less for *dividing* experience into body and mind, than for *subjugating* body to mind. Thus, the fragmented, impersonal biological body is really no more than a projection of mind in disguised form. Just as artistic perspective, with its pretense of representing external bodies from a single point of inspection, is an attempt by consciousness to tear itself away from its own bodily reality, so rationalistic science—including that of the human body—is, in its urge to set itself above the individual personality, no more than an "inhuman subjectivity which has by some strange misunderstanding declared itself the seat of objectivity."⁴⁷

The dialectic of nonidentity that Florenskii sets against the pernicious influence of dualism achieves the rehabilitation of a body as the locus of a miraculous transformation by which individual creaturely existence is able to partake of divine unity. Florenskii's body is subject to two opposing dogmas reconciled through a dialectical antinomy validating at once the truth of the divine Providence of an all-powerful God, and that of the gift to Man of his own independent existence—the gift of freedom.⁴⁸ The life of the flesh is not to be shunned in the spurious interests of a purity of spirit, but rather to be transfigured with divine light. For Florenskii, as in eastern Christianity generally, the ascetic feat *celebrates* rather than denigrates the body, since its purpose is "to attain the incorruptibility and

46. Florenskii, *Stolp i utverzhdienie istiny*, 1:271.

47. Florenskii, "Itogi," 349.

48. Florenskii, *Stolp i utverzhdienie istiny*, 1:278.

deification of the flesh through the receiving of the Holy Spirit. This incorruptibility is . . . the highest responsiveness to the beauty of the flesh—the ability to be moved to tears, to weep for joy at the sight of a beautiful female body.”⁴⁹ It would be quite wrong therefore to interpret the ascetic emphasis as some sort of masochistic inclination. Masochism, no less than the hedonism to which it is (falsely) opposed, is directed not toward the other, but toward a gratification of the self and thus a denial of the body in its real sense. In Berdiaev's words, true ascesis is “the acquisition of *strength for the body* as the weapon of spirit.”⁵⁰ The incorruptibility and Godly innocence that is the final purpose of the ascetic feat can be equated with the resurrection of the body in Christ and, ultimately, the resurrection of the whole of mankind at the Second Coming: “This victory . . . is achieved through the receiving of the Holy Spirit—in communion with the mystery of the maidens representing the Spirit's gifts. The fullness of maidenhood is only in the fullness of the Spirit, that is, at the end of the ascetic feat of the whole of churchly humanity, in the creature's deified body.”⁵¹ Attainment of Godly innocence, resurrection to eternal life, deification of the flesh, unification of unique creatures with God's world in divine love, the imparting of final Meaning to individual existence—all these processes are variations on the same transformational formula. In each case the axis around which the transformation revolves, the impulse setting the mechanism of dialectical antinomies into motion is the body—bound by the borders of its place in space and by the limits of its duration in time; for the body to be resurrected, it is necessary that it be bounded by death. Being in God amounts precisely to a dialectics of *finite* Being in time and space. Approximation to the absolute is conditional on acceptance of boundedness and embodiment. It is the abstraction of theoretical infinity that imposes closure, not the dialectic of actual infinity in which the unbounded is attained though the bounded.

Body as Act, Act as Word

In Florenskii's reconception of sensual existence, the body is seen as a unity of space *and* time, not merely as physical (that is, spatial) matter. Just as space is formed and liable to press upon a resistant body, however, so is time not an impersonal sequence of fragmentary moments stretching into infinity, but rather the particularized time of the individual human lifespan. As in Bakhtin's accounts of the chronotope and the act, Florenskii's body is an unrepeatably union of time and space created by the individual's action on a world shared with others, but impinging upon the individual in unrepeatably fashion, through a time solely his.⁵² For this reason, symbolic significance attaches to self-sacrifice and to the (inner) word

49. *Ibid.*, 308, 310.

50. Nikolai Berdiaev, *Filosofia svobodnogo dukha* (Moscow, 1994), 402.

51. *Ibid.*, 308.

52. Bakhtin writes, “My actual participation in time and space from my unique place in Being guarantees their inescapably compelling actuality and their valuative uniqueness—invests them, as it were, with flesh and blood.” See Mikhail Bakhtin, *Toward a*

as (externally directed) act. The definitive example of the word in this sense is the supreme act of the word made flesh: of the incarnate God. Christ's sacrifice given in complete freedom is the ultimate act of denial, which, by that very token, constitutes the final act of self-affirmation: "According to the higher, spiritual law of identity, self-affirmation is attained in self-denial." Christ's death is inseparable from his resurrection to an eternal life "not only of the soul but of the body also."⁵³ The importance accorded to the notion of self-sacrifice derives not merely from its theological underpinnings but also from its status as an act in which the spatio-temporal contours of an individual's unique presence are defined through a free, conscious choice directed outward toward others rather than, as in suicide, inward in response to the urges of the self-enclosed mind—through a death subordinate neither to a single, abstract cause, nor to a spontaneous biological impulse. Nowadays animals "do" and machines "think" according to cybernetic code, confirming Florenskii's warnings about (and Baudrillard's fatalistic acceptance of) our inexorable flight into abstraction. Only humans inhabit the dimension within which thought and the sensible can be united with the sensuous in sacrificial act.

Florenskii's body is, then, neither the discrete biological object of impulses, drives, and processes, nor the postmodern body reduced to an effect of competing discourses that is, as Terry Eagleton confirms, little different from a body subordinated to an intangible "Spirit."⁵⁴ Nor is it the empirical body as a spatial category subdivided into attributes in a universally applicable taxonomy of nose sizes, waist dimensions, and so on. It is an unrepeatably unity of uniquely individual and all-embracingly general—a (sacrificial) enactment of universal within singular and thus a temporal as well as a spatial entity.

If one accepts Florenskii's premises, the paradox involved in rejecting discrete, "concrete" matter as an illusion derived from arid abstraction dissolves. Building upon those premises, Florenskii's disciple, Aleksei Losev expressed similar sentiments, offering Plato's *eidōs* as his version of the unity of particular and universal:

In an *eidōs*, the more general an object is, the more particular it is. . . . For an eidetic, a living being is a rich *eidōs*, while being itself is even more alive, rich, and concrete. Meanwhile, "man" is for him more abstract; a

Philosophy of the Act, trans. Vadim Liapunov, ed. Michael Holquist and Vadim Liapunov (Austin, 1993), 59.

53. Florenskii, *Stolp i utverzhdienie istiny*, 308, 292. For Berdiaev, ascesis is likewise "the acquisition of strength for the body as the weapon of the spirit." *Filosofīia svobodnogo dukha*, 402. Florenskii also anticipates the ethics of the early Bakhtin who writes: "The truth of the event is not the truth that is self-equivalent . . . in its content [*istina*], but is the rightful and unique position of every participant—the truth [*pravda*] of each participant's actual, concrete ought. . . . It is only from my unique place that self-sacrifice is possible." *Toward a Philosophy*, 44, 49.

54. Eagleton writes of the postmodern fashion for treating subjectivity in terms of the invisible effect of power dispositions: "The term 'post,' if it has any meaning at all, means business as usual, only more so. . . . The result . . . is a new kind of transcendentalism, in which desires, beliefs and interests now occupy just those *a priori* locations which were traditionally reserved for World Spirit or the absolute ego." Eagleton, *The Ideology*, 382.

“European” is still more abstract, and the greatest abstraction of all is a Frenchman living in Paris at such and such a time in such and such a place.⁵⁵

In serving as the path to eternal life, the body is saturated with meaning, acquiring many of the attributes normally associated with subjectivity and consciousness. But for Florenskii, our inner mode of being as a thinking subject itself becomes associated with the external world of the body. In a further turn of the dialectical screw, the antinomical clash of inner and outer, consciousness and body, subject and object is replayed *within* each of these terms. This is true not only of the resurrected body as Word of God but also of consciousness—the realm of the linguistic and artistic word. Florenskii's contribution to the debate in the Orthodox church over *imeborchestvo* (or “nominoclasm”) advances the idea that, by comprehending through the word, we comprehend with our whole bodies: “In the broadest sense we should understand by the term *word* any autonomous manifestation of our beings to the outside world. . . . The rational organism responds to the energy of the reality being comprehended in its entirety, not through one or the other of its functions. . . . The word is posited [*podaetsia*] by the whole organism.”⁵⁶ If the body effects a transformation of the individual being of discrete individuals into the shared world of others, and if cognition (and thus inner consciousness) partakes of the entire body, it is natural that the linguistic word (the material of inner consciousness) should itself serve a transformational function, for the act of speech is “the last stage of subjectivity and the first stage of objectivity.”⁵⁷

The “ontic ambiguity” inherent in the concept of the word as a border simultaneously dividing and uniting subject and object is overcome if we redefine it as an *action* of the subject on the object in which subject and object become one. In his essay “The Magicity of the Word,” Florenskii proclaims that “life is transformed by the word, and in the word, life is made to partake of spirit. . . . To examine the magicity of the word means to understand how and why we can act on the world through the word.” Dualistic interpretations of the word positing an inner, subjective content in external, material form are dismissed on account of their self-enclosedness (their refusal to embrace a dialectic of nonidentity in which the subject is realized in what is other to it). In these cases, Florenskii maintains, “the word, like the concept, is something closed in on itself without exit, confined within the limits of a feeble and unreal subjectivity for which . . . there is no place in being.”⁵⁸ To be real means to exist in dialectical tension with external otherness.

Florenskii's idiosyncratic version of nominalism leads him to the point at which the glorified word as the *basis* for life becomes detached from the human subject and appears to *acquire* a life of its own, together with the

55. Aleksei Losev, *Bytie, imia, kosmos* (Moscow, 1993), 705–6.

56. Florenskii, “Imeslavie,” 289.

57. Florenskii, “Magichnost' slova,” in *U vodorazdelov mysli*, 269.

58. *Ibid.*, 253, 255.

capacity for limitless reproduction, since “the sexual system and activity [of the body] finds an exact reflection in the system and activity of the human voice.” Human semen carries within it the form of a future conscious, meaning-bearing being. By the same token, language is much more than insubstantial content, for, as the spoken word, it contains within itself the potential to act upon and change the world: “However much it is considered as ‘simply’ a liquid and so qualitatively insignificant, semen leads to conception and a person is born. Likewise speech, however insubstantial it is considered, acts on the world, creating what is similar to it.”⁵⁹

The terminology here is, however, unmistakably that of metaphor. This leads Florenskii into dangerous territory. For when he writes of the subjective word’s acquiring an objective body of its own (the word as a mental phenomenon that, like semen, but not *as* semen, contains the seeds of new, bodily life), he is not transcending the dualism of subject and object, but rather translating subjective word into the language of the objective world: to *imagine* the word as semen is to instantiate what is implicitly acknowledged to be abstract and intangible in the lowly vessel of the concrete and specific in order to foster the temporary illusion of tangibility. In fact, it is to step imperceptibly back into the “indwelling” thought mode. As Mikhail Epstein writes, despite its claims of allegiance with the specific, modern metaphor in truth serves the cause of the conceptual and abstract: “As it is transformed into metaphor . . . [myth’s] literal meaning becomes ever more sufficient until it outgrows itself to become a statement of fact; its figurative meaning becomes the increasingly abstract formulation of a concept. The essential linkage of two meanings . . . acquires the properties of a comparison.”⁶⁰ There is no interchangeability between word and semen, language and world, no metamorphosis of one into the other. The comparison of inward, subjective word to outward, objective semen serves only to reinforce the power and dominance of subjective mind over objective body.

Stalinism and the (In)finite Body

Others, too, have seen fit to criticize Florenskii for the reification of language implied in some of his philological work.⁶¹ One could, of course, soften the impact of the critique by referring to an increasingly dogmatic Bolshevik regime as the underlying reason for any compromising of first principles on Florenskii’s part. Along with artists like Vasilii Kandinskii, Florenskii found that the only viable forum for his writing was the highly politicized, Constructivist-dominated Advanced Art and Technol-

59. *Ibid.*, 272–73.

60. Mikhail Epstein, *After the Future: The Paradoxes of Postmodernism and Contemporary Russian Culture*, trans. Anesa Miller-Pogacar (Amherst, 1995), 237.

61. N. K. Bonetskaia is sympathetic to Florenskii’s linguistic theory, but characterizes his axiom that “the word is the object itself” as a primitivistic realism that required modification before it could be incorporated into the sophisticated, Hegelian dialectics of Losev. See N. K. Bonetskaia, “O filologicheskoi shkole P. A. Florenskogo,” *Studia Slavica Hungaricae* 37 (1991–92): 112–88.

ogy Workshops (VKhUTEMAS), and that the language and content of his work needed to be modified accordingly. But the (sometimes precarious) ventures into aesthetics, philology, and mathematics might also be taken as Florenskii's implicit acknowledgment that it is the intrinsic contradictions within his own project which draw him ever closer to the very compartmentalized knowledge he condemns as a legacy of the great post-Renaissance lapse into abstraction and discord:

The Renaissance worldview, placing man in an ontological vacuum, condemns him by that very fact to passivity. In that passivity, the image of the world, like that of man himself, falls apart and fragments into mutually exclusive points of view. . . . When a physicist or a biologist, or a chemist, even a psychologist, a philosopher, and a theologian says one thing at his university department, writes another in his scholarly papers, and at home with his family or friends feels something else . . . does this not mean that each personality has split into several, mutually exclusive, personalities? . . . Is this not a *reductio ad absurdum* of the entire course of our civilization?⁶²

Ever since the spiritual crisis of his youth, Florenskii had held that Christianity alone was capable of making sense of an otherwise empty and superficial sensual reality. Thereafter he saw his life's work in terms of the healing of a fragmented world, a making whole of human knowledge, and thus of humanity itself, a transformation of corrupted rationalism into true Reason through the reincorporation of the Church—Christ's Body—into secular society. The need to de-compartmentalize knowledge, to reconcile science, art, and religion was central to the achievement of this goal and is evident in the affectedly lyrical tone and scientific pretensions of his theodicy. The awkward artifice conveyed by these features indicates the impossible nature of Florenskii's feat no less than his later turn toward the secular disciplines. In the modern world, the word cannot but belong to the sphere of language, the body to that of science, discussions of painting technique to aesthetics. Moreover, in a society driven by scientific Marxism's exhortations to subordinate personal freedoms to class imperatives, notions of transcending the divide between individual and collective through life in the Body of Christ leave themselves dangerously open to misappropriation. Nonetheless, Florenskii continued his vain search for the elusive new synthesis during the 1920s, working simultaneously in mathematics, aesthetics, philology, physics, and theology. He even corresponded with the scientist Vladimir Vernadskii about the existence of a "pneumatosphere"—a realm of material forms that have been spiritually reprocessed and "drawn into the whirlwind of culture."⁶³

Florenskii cannot, of course, ignore the fact that there is, for secular man, no prospect of re-immersion in the devotional world of the icon painter. The magicality of the linguistic word is no substitute for the mystery of the divine word made flesh, of the body resurrected—an axiom that applies with still greater force in a society that embraces atheism

62. Florenskii, "Itogi," 345–46.

63. Florenskii, *Sochineniia*, 1:28–29.

within its guiding ideology. Nonetheless, Florenskii continued to stare contradiction in the face, wearing the priestly cloth in each Soviet institution to which he was forced to give his labor, cutting an ever stranger figure in what must have seemed ever more fantastic surroundings. But expediency (and the need to survive) swiftly asserted themselves. By the mid-1920s, Florenskii was conducting research in applied physics as part of Lenin's electrification project, having realized that pure theory, even of the scientific, rational kind, was no longer an option. In 1933, after several periods of detention, he was accused of counterrevolutionary activity and condemned to ten years' hard labor. Compelled to complete the retreat into the netherworld of mechanistic reason, he spent his last years working on methods of extracting iodine from seaweed for industrial use and on the problems of building on permafrost.

A man who had devoted his intellectual life to combating the deleterious effects of rationalism fell victim in both mind and body to one of rationalism's most frightening creations—the dogma of world communism in its Stalinist hypostasis. (This is not to equate Stalinism's apotheosis of mythic cult with the rationalist project, let alone view it as an illustrative example, but rather to portray Stalin as a sort of Frankenstein's monster.) As I have suggested, Florenskii's war against modernity is best seen as a reassertion of the body in its higher form. Viewed thus, the modern biological body of impersonal drives, genetic codes, and subconscious needs and the postmodern, "ideological" body as site of competing discourses are each reduced to little more than the instantiation of abstract reason in its most triumphantly depersonalizing mode. In closing off Pavel Florenskii's life—spiritual, intellectual, and biological—Soviet communism inadvertently discloses the devastating (and irrational) consequences of the rationalist urge forcibly to impose universal theory on recalcitrant bodies, or hegemonic human minds on a fragile, pliant world. For Florenskii does not indict a particular political theory—like Fedor Dostoevskii and other Russian thinkers, he views socialism and capitalism as two sides of a single coin—but an entire cultural mind-set. The ecological implications of his assault on modernity's construction of a rapacious new reality based on the principle of "I want,"⁶⁴ would not be lost on those with the "benefit" of late twentieth-century, postindustrial hindsight. Since "I want" implies assimilation of the other rather than genuine erotic wonderment at the other's difference, the suppression of sensual being leads in one case to the mass extermination of biological bodies (Stalin's gulag), and in the other, to the erosion of the ecological system giving succor to those bodies, or to a fantastic future in which a billion digitalized souls fulfill their needs across an ocean of disembodied cyberspace from the lonely islands of their home offices. It is, perhaps, in response to some of these trends that western political thinkers of various hues have now begun to seek ways of going beyond both the statism of the left and the right-wing emphasis on individual fulfillment.

64. Florenskii, "Obratnaia perspektiva," 59.

But if Florenskii's missionary zeal appears on occasion to spill over into hysteria, his fate at the hands of the Stalinist state offers stark vindication for the extremity of his views. In "Inverse Perspective," he associated the abstract illusionism of Renaissance aesthetics with "ghostly dreams" and death, just as he connected the multiple perspectives of the icon painter with reality and life. Working from within the constraints of a modern aesthetic long since separated from reality, he was forced to write in the alienated language of metaphor (Renaissance illusionism is "like" but is not death). In 1937, the dualism implicit in the illusory *figure* of rational abstraction as death is transcended when the forces of rational abstraction transform figure into reality. Death-as-image becomes death itself.

Like other Silver Age figures, Florenskii was far from seeing the Bolshevik revolution as an unmitigated disaster. World Marxism is portrayed as the Renaissance's final crisis, the cathartic trauma that will usher in a new life freed from the prisonhouse of the mind: "I am sure that the worst is yet to come . . . that the crisis has still not passed. But I am sure that the crisis will purify . . . the atmosphere throughout the world, which has been poisoned from the seventeenth century onwards."⁶⁵ These sentiments reflect the apocalyptic impulse that, as David Bethea argues, permeates Russian culture, and at whose heart Bethea is correct in placing Florenskii.⁶⁶ But the "finalizing" aspect of Florenskii's approach to history cannot be seen outside the context of his concept of embodiment, in which the establishment of a concrete boundary simultaneously separating and joining singularity and universal otherness facilitates the dialectical process by which, in interacting with otherness, the body enacts its infinite meaning. Paradoxically, and contra Bethea, Clark, and Holquist, Florenskii's valorization of finiteness corresponds closely to Bakhtin's celebration of unfinalizability, since, through opposing terminologies, what both thinkers set out to refute are the constraining effects of abstraction upon meaning.⁶⁷ For Florenskii, the danger is most vividly represented by the abstraction of infinite space that reduces all phenomena to sets of self-identical theoretical coordinates. For Bakhtin it is epitomized in the abstraction of monologic ideas that presume to reduce all phenomena to instantiations of themselves and thus to know all outcomes.⁶⁸

Florenskii's eschatological view of revolution is that of someone for whom history, like space, is bounded and real rather than infinite and theoretical, for whom meaning is generated through the nonidentity of

65. Florenskii, *Sochineniia*, 1:25.

66. See Bethea, *The Shape of Apocalypse*, 36.

67. Bethea writes of Florenskii's "passionate search for 'actual infinity' and the *coincidentia oppositorum* . . . that so clearly opposes Bakhtinian logic." *The Shape of Apocalypse*, 204.

68. In his early aesthetics, Bakhtin posits as his supreme value finalization (*zavershenie*)—the process by which an author's excess vision "rounds off" his hero's life and establishes its meaning from the external position of the loving other, without compromising the infinite freedom deriving from his corresponding ability to perceive the world from within the hero's "self for itself." See Mikhail Bakhtin, "Avtor i geroi v esteticheskoi deiatel'nosti," in *Estetika slovesnogo tvorchestva*, ed. S. Bocharov (Moscow, 1990), 9–192.

self and other, eternal life out of the absolute finality of death, and faith through the traumatic discovery that “there is a realm of darkness and death, and in that realm there is salvation.”⁶⁹

Amidst a darkness that he could not possibly have foreseen at the moment of this early revelation, Florenskii was in 1934 offered the chance of emigrating to Czechoslovakia. He rejected the intercession on his behalf, demanding the cessation of all negotiations. The hyperbole in Sergei Bulgakov’s assessment of this decision is, perhaps, not entirely misplaced: “Father Pavel was organically incapable of being torn, voluntarily or involuntarily, away from his homeland, and both he and his fate are the glory and greatness of Russia, although at the same time, her most terrible shame.”⁷⁰ Ironically, Pavel Florenskii’s slow march toward Stalin’s firing squad enabled him to capture in death something of the pre-Renaissance identity that had eluded him in life. For, if Bulgakov’s words have any credibility, it is a death bearing just the faintest aura of the “ascetic feat” of which Florenskii had written earlier—that unique synthesis of freedom and fate, conscious choice and acute corporeality that has as its outcome the “spiritualization of the flesh” and that, “according to the higher, spiritual law of identity,” achieves “self-affirmation in self-denial.”⁷¹ Baudrillard’s juxtaposition of totalitarianism’s “extermination” of death with our own ineluctable progress toward the melancholic anti-world of pure effect is, I submit, as distortive of the symbolic significance of Florenskii’s end, as it is needlessly compliant with our end-of-millennium neurosis. Florenskii was a mythological thinker for whom events in the material world point unremittingly beyond themselves. Whether or not one is willing to accord martyrdom to Florenskii’s empirical person, the mythical persona whose contours are completed through his death—and the dialectics of finite Being—can be said to acquire infinite content through its very boundedness. By asserting in his thought, as through his life, the non-self-identical presence of the body in its highest sense, Florenskii underscores the relevance of his rehabilitation of bodily existence to our thinking about, and mode of living in, the century to come. This sense is that of the original Greek word *aistheton*: the sense in which sense itself is reunited with the sensual.

69. Florenskii, *Sochineniia*, 1:7.

70. Bulgakov, quoted in Florenskii, *Sochineniia*, 1:23.

71. Florenskii, *Stolp i utverzhdienie istiny*, 308.