Father Pavel Florensky and Vladimir Favorsky: Mutual Insights into the Perception of Space

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ABSTRACT

The authors present a translation of Pavel Florensky's explanation of Vladimir Favorsky's cover for Florensky's book Imaginary Points in Geometry (1922). They also present illustrations of that cover and other works by Favorsky that are pertinent to his association with Florensky. In the first introductory section, Kirill Sokolov gives a practising artist's assessment of Favorsky's method of organising time and space. In the second introductory section, Avril Pyman highlights Florensky's interest in theology, art and science to elucidate what he called "the general trend towards synthesis of our future culture" and to explain why he considered Favorsky's work "art impregnated with mathematical thought".

VLADIMIR ANDREEVICH FAVORSKY (1886–1964)

Favorsky was an artist who worked as an engraver, sculptor, monumentalist, stage designer and theoretician of art [2]. He studied at various art schools in Moscow and from 1906–1907, in Munich, in the private academy of Professor Shimon Hollosy.

In 1907 Favorsky began to engrave on wood, and this remained his favourite medium for the rest of his life. His range was wide and his productivity abundant. He engraved illustrations for several books of the Old Testament and for works by Shakespeare, Dante, Pushkin, Tolstoy and many Soviet authors. It is not easy to point to any particular work that could be described as the peak of his achievement; within a framework of an enduring overall conception, each series approaches temporal and spatial problems in its own way, a feature that gave adepts of his school the confidence to continue to develop his ideas in their turn.

At a time when an overriding importance was attached to individual experiments, Favorsky was exceptional in that he worked steadily towards an objective, all-embracing concept of art. In 1915, he translated A. Hildebrandt's Problems of Form in Visual Art, a book that was fundamental to his own theory [3]. This theory probably finds its fullest expression in the lectures on composition that Favorsky gave at VKhUTEMAS [4] from 1921 to 1923. The key concept was the thought that composition is a way of organising time. The function of time in geometry comes under close study in Florensky's work, also.

If we put aside stylistic differences of direction (from greater or lesser degrees of realistic figurative art to pure abstraction) as being purely incidental to Favorsky's primary concerns, it becomes clear that these concerns had to do with the study of the potential and variety of tensions generated by the representation of spatial ideas on the flat, rectangular surface of the page. Central to his thought is the paradox: "The only possible representation is flat, yet it will always, one way or another, appear spatial" [5]. For all Favorsky's overt attachment to Platonism, this thought is distinctly existential in character. It is possible to escape Favorsky's stylistic influence but not his concept: however deeply one may plunge into the Suprematism of Malevich, the Expressionism of Pollock or the collage techniques of Pop Art, one inevitably will be brought face-to-face with the operation of the laws he discovered and formulated—secondarily, perhaps, with those expressed in his lectures and theoretical articles, but firstly and most clearly with those reflected in his practice as an engraver. He left a school, but, more importantly, he left a method.

PAVEL ALEKSANDROVICH FLORENSKY (1882–1943)

Florensky was compared during his lifetime to Pascal—even, perhaps misleadingly, to Leonardo. His father, an engineer, once told him: "Your strength is in the sphere where the specific touches on the general" [6]. In one of his last letters to his own son, Florensky himself wrote:

From early childhood until this day I have stubbornly dwelt on one thing, but this one thing needs to be approached from various angles... until I myself have weighed out, ground down, analysed and calculated, I do not understand a phenomenon, I can speak and reason about it, but it is not mine [7].

The "one thing" on which Florensky’s thought was concentrated was his own monistic, theocentric view of the world and of the Word, which was "in the beginning". "All

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Fig. 1. Vladimir Favorsky, the cover to Pavel Florensky's *Mnimosti v geometrii*, wood engraving, 143 x 120 mm, 1922.

Fig. 2. Vladimir Favorsky, Portrait of P. A. Florensky, pencil on paper, 31 x 32 mm, 1922. (Collection of the Tretiakov Gallery) This is one of the many portraits of Florensky reproduced for the Soviet Culture Foundation as part of an exhibit of Favorsky's work organized by the Foundation for the Revival of Forgotten Names (see Ref. [17]).

sciences”, he wrote, “are a description of reality. Reality is described by symbols or images. Every image and every symbol . . . we name, and therefore it is word. . . . All [sciences] are language and only language” [8].

A theologian and priest of the Orthodox Church, Florensky held a degree in higher mathematics; found new uses for a special kind of ultra-microscope; lectured in electromagnetics, physics, astronomy and geometry; edited the Soviet dictionary of technology; and made a significant contribution during the 1920s to GOELRO (State Commission for the Electrification of Russia). Even in exile and in a succession of prison camps—where as an ‘ideologically alien element’ he spent much time from the first internal exile to Nizny-Novgorod (later Gorky) in 1928 until his death, about which there are many rumours but which is officially stated to have taken place somewhere in the Leningrad district in 1945—he continued to lay tracks that he was not destined to travel, starting anew from the founda-

This priest and scientist was also an aesthete and philosopher; his friends included the poets Andrey Bely and Velimir Khlebnikov, the thinkers Vasily Rozanov and Sergey Bulgakov, the composer Aleksandr Scriabin, the Futurist painters David Burliuk, Lyubov Popova, Aleksandr Vesnin and Vladimir Tatlin and, of course, the serene, hard-thinking engraver Vladimir Favorsky (Fig. 2). It is typical of the man that he published his theological magnum opus, *The Pillar and Foundation of Truth* [10] (1914), in letter form, elegantly illustrated and beautifully printed in full accord with the symbolist insistence on the essential relationship between the content, style and overall appearance of a book.

In his early days as a student at the Moscow Theological Academy in Sergiev Posad (Zagorsk), Florensky wrote poetry and contributed to the symbolist journal Vesy (The Scales). It was not as an artist, however, that he interested his contemporaries, but rather as a Platonic teacher, a dispenser of seminal, cross-disciplinary ideas. “His original thoughts lived in me”, Bely declared [11]. Like the symbolists, Florensky believed in the ‘magic’ of words and in the interrelatedness of all arts and sciences; like the writer E. Zamiatatin, another practising engineer, Florensky saw civilisation in terms of thermodynamics. Favorsky enlisted Florensky to lecture at VKhUTEMAS from 1921 to 1924. These lectures on the analysis of space in works of art [12] and Florensky’s concept of technology (with its insistence on the technical instrument as an extension of the human body) influenced Tatlin. Florensky’s constant search for synthesis and his belief in the essentially liturgical function of art were reflected, to some extent, in the journal *Makovets* and in the work and theories of Vasilii Chekrygin [13], of whose secular religiosity the priest disapproved but whose painting he admired. ‘Makovets’ is the name of the small hill on which the Monastery at Zagorsk is built, and the journal and society of that name were founded under the
influence of Florensky. Favorsky's cover for the journal (Fig. 3) illustrates Florensky's premise that life is above art and that the source of all beauty and truth is "to be discovered not invented". Florensky hoped that the journal would become "a gatherer of Russian culture", just as St. Sergius, 'the founder of the Makovets', had salvaged and gathered Russian culture in the fourteenth century [14]. The original name taken by the Moscow-based group of artists and poets was 'Art-Life', and Makovets was their journal, edited and published by Aleksey Mikhailovich Chernyshev, brother of the artist Nikolay Mikhailovich Chernyshev. The name originated from the title Florensky had wanted to give to the first chapter of a book on aesthetics he was planning at the time of writing Imaginary Points in Geometry. This chapter, entitled "Na Makovtse" and consisting of a long excerpt from a letter to Rozanov written in 1913, was not fated to be published until 1985 [15].

In the first number of Makovets, a "Prologue" set out the credo of the society:

We are now seeing the end of analytical art and the task we have set ourselves is to collect all the scattered elements into one mighty synthesis. It is our belief that the regeneration of art is only possible if we hold fast to what we have received from the great masters of the past and on condition of an uncompromising revival in our art of the principle of the living and the eternal [16].

Besides Favorsky, Chekrygin and Chernyshev, 'Makovets' (as 'Art-Life' was to call itself after the foundation of the journal) included the artists M. A. Dobrov, L. F. Zhegin, K. K. Zefirov, M. S. Rodionov, S. M. Romanovich, V. F. Ryndin and A. V. Shevchenko. The group organised four exhibitions, one in 1922, two in 1924 and one in 1925.

Favorsky became friendly with Florensky during the civil war, when Favorsky, like many other intellectuals, took temporary refuge under the protection of the great monastery in Sergiev Posad (see Fig. 4) where Florensky, at the time of the artist's arrival, was working on a systematised description of the icons and other treasures of the Monastery for the new Soviet commission for the preservation of ancient monuments. The work sparked off lectures on the philosophy of cult and treatises on reversed perspective and the symbolic structure of the iconostasis. Parallel to this, Florensky was teaching geometry and writing a book on the methodology of teaching, in between contributing to an encyclopedia of mathematics.

The book Imaginary Points in Geometry was in part a by-product of all this activity. It adumbrated Florensky's application of non-Euclidean geometry to 'spaces and electric fields', which was to lead to several scientific publications, one of them a major standard work on dielectrics (1924), written during his work for GOELRO. In Imaginary Points in Geometry, the mathematical study is followed by a remarkable application of these mathematical principles to Dante's concept of time and space in the Divine Comedy and by the "Explanation of the Cover" (translated below). To judge by Favorsky's works then and later, priest and artist must have spent many hours discussing Dante and the 'magic' significance of numbers and symbols (see Figs 5 and 6) as well as how to suggest a third dimension on a flat surface and the implications for the 'fourth dimension'. In 1923, the Moscow publishers 'Pomor'e' published Pavel Florensky's Chislo kak forma (Number as form), with a cover design by Favorsky (see Fig. 7), to which readers may find a key in the "Explanation of the Cover" of Imaginary Points in Geometry. The following document is a memorial to these Olympian discussions among the ruins, as is the ex-libris (Fig. 8), which Favorsky engraved for his friend, "the priest Pavel Florensky", in 1922 [17].

"EXPLANATION OF THE COVER" BY FATHER PAVEL FLORENSKY

The cover of this book is made from a wood engraving by Vladimir Andreevich Favorsky. Here, as is usual for the artist, the engraving is not merely ornamental but forms an organic part of the book as a whole. It is perhaps the first experiment of its kind in the art of engraving, which has
undergone such a revival in our time. While we are on the subject, this is a 
trend that may yet bring forth a rich 
harvest, given the general tendency of 
our emerging culture towards synthe-
sis. Not only out of gratitude to the art-
ist for his sensitive collaboration but 
also because such collaboration is of 
the very essence of the cultural prob-
lems of our time, the author of this 
book has thought it proper to add a 
few words in explanation of the cover 
book has thought it proper to add a 
covering of which we are speaking, in connec-
tion with certain pointers it contains 
suggesting the possible application to 
the visual arts of the theory I have 
elucidated in my book.

Let us call to mind certain features 
of the psychology of seeing. If one 
looks out into open space through a 
narrowish crack, from the side, espe-
cially if the wall with the crack in it is 
not over-brightly lit, then the flat sur-
face of the wall is also within one’s field 
of vision. But the eye cannot accom-
modate simultaneously to both the 
space perceptible beyond the wall and 
the flat surface about the opening. For 
this reason, if one concentrates one’s 
attention on the brightly lit space in 
relation to the opening itself, the eye 
both sees it and does not see it. The 
eye saw the opening in the wall as it 
penetrated into the depth of the space 

beyond but ceased to see that opening 
as soon as the penetration was truly ef-

efected, although the memory of what 
it saw before cannot be eliminated 
from the mind: the dim impression of 
the wall on the edge of feeling con-
tinues to excite awareness of what ac-
tually was seen before. Awareness nec-

essarily becomes dual, split between 
the image of what has been directly 
perceived and the image of the in-
directly perceived, through the inter-
mediary of something that resembles 
sensation. In these conditions of re-
ceptivity, there are two elements pre-
sent in our consciousness, or two layers 
of elements, similar in content but sig-
ificantly dissimilar in their position in 
our consciousness, and thus incapable 
of coordination, mutually exclusive.

The view through a window pane 
leads still more convincingly to the 
same dual awareness: together with 
the actual view, the glass is present to 
our conscious mind, having been seen 
by us before the view but seen no 
longer, although our vision is aware of 
it, as indeed is our sense of touch, if, 
for instance, we touch it with our brow. 
From this follows the pictorial and 
architectural problems of the contem-
porary (i.e. glazed) window, as a kind 
of false opening in a false wall; in 
buildings with large glass roofs on 
even glass walls, this problem begins to 
oblude most disturbingly.

When we examine a transparent 
body of significant thickness—for in-
stance, a fish-tank with water in it or a 
solid glass cube (an inkwell)—then 
our consciousness wavers most un-
easily between our perception of the 
two edges of the transparent body, 
which are dissimilar in their position 
(in our consciousness) but similar in 
their content (and it is this last factor 
that is the source of our unease). In 
our consciousness, the body is not 
stable, being perceived now as ‘some-
thing’, i.e. a body, and now as ‘noth-
ing’ (nothing visible), in so far as it is 
transparent. Nothing to sight, it is yet 
something to feeling; but this some-
thing is transfigured by visual memory 
into something apparently visible. The 
transparent object is something in the 
nature of an apparition.

The translucent greenery of vernal 
groves fills the heart with unease, not 
just because it appears in ‘the early 
spring’ but for purely optical rea-
sons—because of its transparency. 
Lending space stereoscopic depths, 
the razor-edged (though not neces-
sarily ‘sticky’) leaves of this greenery 
mark deep points in space and, being 
densely distributed, do this with con-
siderable psychological force. From 
this the whole of space, which now ap-
pears to us as an object, takes on a 
visual character of glasslike solidity.
Again, it is and is not; in truth, we have 
here a clear illustration of Plato’s to 
μῆν δῶ (non-being). And just one more 
example, particularly explicit. I hap-
pened once to be standing in the 
Church of the Nativity in Sergiev 
Posad, almost directly opposite the 
closed royal doors. Through the 
wooden tracery, I could see the altar 
clearly, and the gates in turn were vis-
ible to me through the copper grill 
dividing the nave from the sanctuary. 
Three layers of space; yet each could 
be clearly perceived thanks only to a 
special adjustment of sight. When this 
was made, the other two assumed a 
special position in the consciousness 
and, as a result, in comparison to the 
one I could see clearly, were evaluated 
as semi-existent.

Thus, in our visual concept of the 
world, it is essential that, together with 
images actually visible, we should dis-
tinguish images that are visible in the 
abstract, yet which are inalienably pre-
sent in our awareness thanks to our 
 peripheral vision, our touch and other 
perceptions—not purely visual but
verging on the visual, leading towards it, hinting at it. In other words, in our visual awareness there are visual images and there are apparently visual images. It is not hard to recognise in this duality a visual projection of the dual nature of the geometrical flat surface; here, the actually visible images correspond to the real side of the surface, whereas the images that are visible in the abstract correspond to the imaginary. The two-sidedness of the geometrical surface is a symbol of the dual position of visible images in our consciousness but taken to the limit, i.e. to the point where the thickness of the separate layers of space is infinitely small and the difficulty of equating the actual and abstract images extremely great. If we see the near side of the surface, then we only know that there is in fact another side in the abstract. Yet to have abstract knowledge of a demonstrably visual image, the essence of which is precisely its demonstrable visibility, is to receive an impression of it in some other, not strictly visual, way, which is yet subject to a visual corrective through the abstract concept or through the image retained by memory. In this sense, the reality is the incarnation of the abstract into demonstrably visible material form from which the abstraction was originally deduced; and the imaginary point is an incarnation of this same abstraction, but in a demonstrably visible, alien material. If one prefers, reality is when the abstract and the concrete have the same meaning (when they are tautological), whereas the imaginary point is symbolic (allegorical). In this sense, it is proper to speak of concepts of sensations as imaginary sensations, or of sensations of the imaginary, that is, the limit of the imaginary. When one comes to think of it, the only content of a sensation is its actual sensual effectiveness; a sensation in the mind is not just nothing but another sensation (for every concept is connected to some kind of sensual substratum as its point of application) perceived as an alien concept. It would be appropriate in this context to recall Meynong’s term Pseudoexistenz, although without hinting at the sense in which it is used by Meynong. These elements, which have been registered separately in the consciousness, and imaginary images correspond exactly to the imaginary geometrical surface-images. The effective presence of imaginary perceptions in any concrete experiment encourages the study of art to consider

the imaginary: it is therefore only proper that the theory of visual art should have its say on the exposition of imaginary points in geometry offered above.

Now let us turn to Favorsky’s attempt to make use of the two kinds of visual images in such a way as to give artistic expression to the theory of imaginary points.

The first problem with which the engraver was confronted was how to establish and maintain the wholeness of the fundamental flat surface, because without an inviolate flat surface it would be impossible not only to make images on either side of it but even to differentiate between the one side and the other. This first problem is solved by the lettering, which maintains the fundamental flatness of the image on the surface of the page, and equally by designating the points of the coordinating axes by the letters \( X \), \( O \), \( Y \) and by passing the vertical through \( X \). The letters \( X \), \( O \), \( Y \) are sufficiently massive in themselves and contribute to the desired effect. The stability of the main vertical is reinforced also by the placement of the author’s surname [ Florensky ], which is written horizontally directly above the vertical, slightly higher than his Christian name [ Pavel ].

The page as such is not, of course, white, but colourless: it is an abstract potential for the making of images. It would be a mistake to see this page as a sheet of paper, something that in itself is neither a flat surface nor anything else definable in geometrical

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Fig. 5. Vladimir Favorsky, frontispiece for Dante’s Vita nova, wood engraving, 78 × 59 mm, 1933. The sacred number ‘9’ is before Dante’s mind’s eye as he writes; thus, the artist is justified in giving it a material solidity greater than that of the writer himself.

Fig. 6. Vladimir Favorsky, illustration for Dante’s Vita nova, wood engraving, 78 × 59 mm, 1933. The black ellipse with the jagged white centre serves the same purpose as the white space in the black square in Fig. 1. The ellipse suggests, in strictly spatial terms, the imminence of another dimension behind the apocalyptic vision of dropping birds and falling stars.
Fig. 7. Vladimir Favorsky, the cover to Pavel Florensky's Chislo kak forma, wood engraving, 143 x 120 mm, 1923. This engraving is the product of discussions on the form of numbers. Numbers are here seen in the process of forming the chaos of matter (the black area) into abstract geometrical ideas (the white lines and shapes). The placement of the digits 1, 9, 2, 3 around a circle containing the number 6 suggests the cyclic nature of seasonal time, as well as informing us of the year of the publication.

terms; rather, we should think of the page as an infinitely thin space for images, something in the nature of a transparent film stretched over the sheet of paper. This film is not yet, in its own right, either side of the figurative surface but the whole surface with both sides and all its thickness, however infinitesimally small this may actually be. This surface is brought into being by the artist.

The next thing the artist has to do is to show, to demonstrate clearly both sides of this film-space in all their qualitative tonalities. The front side of the surface, as the one that is immediately visible, is endowed with the warmth of sensual perception and stands out, though under no circumstance does it obtrude beyond the basic flatness of the lettering. The large rectangle shaded with black lines, thanks to the blackness and horizontal nature of the lines, which appear as warm, gives the image of the front side of the surface. On the rectangle, standing out from it, as a purely real image, is a semi-ellipse in a small, totally black rectangle—the warmest and most prominent part of the filmlike space. The thin white border, which shows the thickness of this rectangle, also serves to make it stand out further, bringing it closer to the viewer. All these are, properly speaking, visual images. They are contrasted to the side of the design to the right of the vertical, engraved almost exclusively with white lines. This is the imaginary side of the surface, the reverse of the filmlike space, and not just any part of it, but precisely that part that is underneath the shaded rectangle on the left-hand side. The main line of the imaginary side is the arc of the hyperbola in the act of straightening itself out—the imaginary adjunct of the real ellipse, an adjunct that it is necessary to envisage as touching the ellipse at its highest point.

To give colour to this line, the engraver has enmeshed it in a series of horizontal white strokes. And on the abstract colourlessness of the filmlike space there has appeared a cold white line: such a colour, the opposite of the warm blackness of the front side, is its reverse; the white colour of this reverse is felicitously conveyed at the top right, where a white grid has been placed.

The question arises, why should the reverse be white? Clearly, if it is to represent something in the nature of a residual trace of the sensually perceived black, then as a complementary image or a residual trace it is essential that it should be white and no other colour. Furthermore, visibility, as a substrate of real images, is expressed by the presence of the warm black; as a result of this, the absence of visibility (that is, some other perception, when expressed in visible form) is necessarily imagined as negative—visible in form yet invisible in content. The white line is called upon to express this: it is like a line, i.e. black, but emptied of its blackness, hollow inside, a line and not a line at the same time. In this way, the right-hand side is presented as though it were not drawn but pressed out in relief, presented not so much to sight, as such, as to our sense of touch. The impression of this side's being the reverse of the other is reinforced by the letter O in the lower right-hand corner, traced in mirror writing and, again, in white: this is not a new letter, but the same black O that is to be seen in the lower left-hand corner, only perceived through the surface. The relation of the right-hand to the left-hand O may be explained as follows: let us imagine that O should be written in pencil on paper and then pressed out in relief on the other side of the sheet of paper. This letter, as a result, would be both visible and sensible to touch. Then let the sheet of paper be fixed immovably. If, after this, someone was asked to make a drawing of this sheet of paper, looking at it from the front and feeling the reverse side with his hand, then one would obtain a drawing like Favorsky's cover, and the parts would be placed in the same way, for having followed the width of the sheet—with the eye—from O to X the person making the drawing would then use the powers of observation of
his hand from precisely that point where the eye had refused to go on serving him, that is, he would have moved his hand from the point X to O. As a result, the points of the surface that gradually get farther from the vertical, which passes through X, would be represented on the reverse also as getting farther from the vertical, but already not to the left but to the right; one would be aware of the movement of the hand across the page as a continuation of the movement of the eye. That is why the point O perceptible to feeling would be at the farthest point in the picture from the point O perceptible to sight: their relationship to one another would be approximately that of the mirror image—approximately, because the measure of the space that is perceptible to touch is not identical with that which is perceptible to feeling.

The same is true of the whole figure, which gives, on the right-hand side, a transposition in terms of a visual mirror image of the reverse side of the surface, though perceived by touch. In other words, one has to imagine the filmlike surface of the image as though it were split into two sides and one side were peeled back from the surface at an angle of 180° close to the vertical axis, which passes through X, in the way one opens the page of a book.

It is at this point that the engraver comes face-to-face with the greatest obstacle: how to demonstrate that both halves of the drawing, the right and the left, are not merely juxtaposed to one another, albeit different in quality—one purely visual, the other involving sight and touch—but also that they are, precisely, two sides of one and the same surface. The engraver had to demonstrate that the right-hand side of the drawing represents a splitting of the surface only in cognitive, but not in material, terms. This is achieved first by the fact that, even when looked at separately, each side is possessed of an indication of the other in the form of a small breech through to the other side, and the connection between the two sides is asserted by these two breeches. The breech in the obverse side of the surface is made in the most salient part, where it is most persuasively effective. This is done demonstratively, by a kind of prescient shift of the perceiving centre of consciousness to the other side of the surface. Then, in this space, we are aware of the negative-white colour of the reverse side, and on it, in high relief, the mirror impression of the i, the symbol for the imaginary point, made like the mirror-image O, were we looking from there, the i would be seen to be written the right way round, but from here it looks like mirror-writing: it is the visual image from here of the i that is written there, or the raised trace of the i that is written here felt from there. Represented by a white line, this i is clearly of a different sort than the letters X, O, Y on the front side of the surface and, moreover, it is whiter than the white reverse of the surface, i.e. more abstract. This breech in the obverse is a view, or a relief conveyed by visual means, of the reverse, of that same reverse that is represented on the right-hand half of the figure. But this breech is not coordinated with the obverse of the surface and is simultaneously closer than the black rectangle and farther away: it is impossible to coordinate things essentially the same but occupying opposite positions in our consciousness.

Both sides of the surface are connected in the right-hand side of the figure also—by a breech back out of the imaginary into the real. The character of the breech here, however, is not demonstrative but abstract, not a clear prescience but a vague memory of abandoned, visual space, which re-emerges every now and again as we first enter the space, which we can only know by touch. The narrow black ellipse over the field shaded by diagonal black lines is presented precisely as such a memory. Such, too, is the sliver from the real side, albeit on the verge of the imaginary; although it is in fact in imaginary space, it is not coordinated with it. This, taken together with the white ellipse across the white-shaded field, conveys the fluctuation of the geometrical figure as it actually plunges through the surface, when it is not yet defined and is simultaneously imaginary and real.

Let us now return to the breech in the left part of the figure. The sharp contrast of the edges, black and white, make the i the visual centre of the whole page, taking the eye irresistibly, as a result of which the entire left-hand part of the figure is contemplated with direct vision and for this reason stands on the page and on the surface of the page with maximum stability. Then, however, the right side of the image, particularly along the edge, is necessarily perceived very dimly, by peripheral vision, which is distracted by the breech to the left. All the right-hand side, already invested with an abstract character by the way in which it is engraved, thus finally loses all solidity and stability. The misty area of the right-hand side of the picture takes off from the surface of the page, wavers, revolving around the basic vertical, advances on the spectator like a book being slammed shut but with the left-hand cover held firm. This impression of the instability of the right-hand side is strongly supported, in the first place, by the 'three levels' of the surface (the grid stands out above the rest and thus is nearer to the viewer than the horizontal shading, and still more prominent is the second grid in the square); in the second place, it is strongly supported by the way the parallel lines of both grids and of the horizontal shading bottom left appear to be closing in on one another to create an illusion of perspective; this again suggests that the whole right-hand part is sloping away, as though the sheet of paper on which the cover is drawn had begun to uncurl from the vertical and had begun to open of itself; in the third place, this compositional and functional intent is further promoted by a certain broadening out over the entire right-hand side of the engraving, as though the right-hand edge were getting nearer and nearer to the eye.

Finally, a few words remain to be said about the lettering. We began by noting that it is the letters that establish the flatness of the surface. But this flatness could not be established by

Fig. 8. Vladimir Favorsky, ex-libris for Pavel Florensky, wood engraving, 59 × 48 mm, 1922. The heraldic motif present in this wood engraving suggests Florensky’s commitment to science (the diagram on the shield) and his service as a priest (designated by the lettering) to a church at once militant and martyred.
v геометрии falls into the sphere of imaginary points, that is, into the dimly seen part of the surface, and so forth.

Such, basically, is the explanation of Favorovsky's geometrical composition.

—29 July 1922
(11 August—Julian calendar)

References and Notes

1. P. A. Florensky, Mnimosti v geometrii (Imaginary points in geometry) (Moscow: Pomor'e, 1922). The book was originally published in an edition of 850.


3. A. Hildebrandt, Problemy formy v izobrazitel'nom iskusstve (Problems of form in figurative art), translated from the German by V. A. Favorovsky and N. B. Rozenfeld (Moscow: Musaget, 1914).

4. Veshchii khudozhnost' i tekhnikskii material (Higher Artistic and Technical Workshops), later known as VKUTEIN (Higher Artistic and Technical Institute). Favorovsky worked there as a teacher from 1921-1925, serving as rector from 1923-1925.


7. Florensky [6].


12. The overall title of these lectures was "An Analysis of Space in Works of Art." An article, abstracted from the lecture, on reversed perspectives in icon painting was eventually published in Uchenye zapiski Tartuskogo gos. Universiteta. Trudy po znakomym sistemam, No. 3 (Tartu, 1987), but the book that Florensky prepared, Analiz prostoritvennosti v khudozhestvennom izobrazitelnostykh proizvedeniyakh, though ready for publication on 5 February 1924 (see Hagemeister [6] p. 412, n. 83) has been published only in extracts. The fullest collection of Florensky's published writings to date in Russian is in the first volume of Father Pavel Florensky's collected works, Sobranie sochinenii. I. Stati po iskusstvu, N. A. Struve, ed. (Paris: YMCA Press, 1985) with an introduction and chronology of Florensky's life and works by Father Sergey Bulgakov. Some of Florensky's ideas on space have been taken up and developed further by B. V. Rauschenbach (see Leonardo 16, No. 1 (1985) p. 28; 15, No. 1 (1982) p. 28; 16, No. 1 (1983) p. 69; 15, No. 4 (1982) p. 335; and 16, No. 4 (1985) p. 334.


17. Sovietsky Fond Kultury (Soviet Culture Foundation) has mentioned the name of Pavel Florensky for the first time in their programme of "The Revival of Forgotten Names". The best account of the reappearance of his name in Soviet letters is contained in the catalogue of an exhibition arranged by the Fond Vozvrashchenie Zabytkh Izmen, Pavel Florensky, Katalog vystavki knizhneishestvi (Moscow, 1989). The exhibition was arranged by O. I. Genisaretzkiy and S. I. Serov; the catalogue compiled by A. S. Trubacheva, M. S. Trubacheva, Z. S. Trubachev and P. V. Florensky; introduction by D. S. Likhachev. There is a declared intention to publish his complete works.

General Bibliography

V. A. Favorovsky, Ob iskustve, o knige, o gravure (On art, the book, engraving) (Moscow: Kniga, 1986).


Nicoletta Misler, Pavel Florenskij: La prospettiva e i nuovi miti (Rome: Casa di Libro, 1985).