Alberti and Nicholas of Cusa: Perspective as “Coincidence of Opposites”  
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In I Libri della Famiglia Leon Battista Alberti, the 15th-century Italian architect and art theorist, writes: “Nature, that is God, made man, partly celestial and divine, as well as partly most beautiful and most noble above mortal things.”¹ His expressed belief that God not only made mankind, but God is Nature, the world that we see and experience, suggests the infinite God be conceived in terms of human experience and consequently in terms of the finite. Alberti’s notion of God as nature should be considered within the context of his proposal for a single point perspective construction contained in his treatise On Painting,² through which he intended to indicate the divine in what seems to be a clear manifestation of our visually perceived world.³

This is not, however, an all together novel idea. In 1924 Erwin Panofsky introduced his Perspective as Symbolic Form, arguing that Renaissance mathematical space may be “characterized as (to extend Ernst Cassirer’s felicitous term to the history of art) one of those ‘symbolic forms’ in which ‘spiritual meaning is attached to a concrete, material sign and intrinsically given to this sign’”(41).⁴ The special qualities of a geometric, measured space opened up new possibilities for how space might convey meaning: “For the structure of an infinite, unchanging and homogeneous space—in short, a purely mathematical space—is quite unlike the structure of psychophysiological space” or other empirical renderings of space (Panofsky 29-30).⁵

Panofsky clearly ties this Renaissance space to the possibility of philosophical and theological notions of the infinite, suggesting, for example, that “the result was the concept of an infinity, an infinity not only prefigured in God, but indeed actually embodied in empirical reality” (65).⁶ He suggests, “Perspective, in transforming the ousia (reality) into the phainomenon (appearance), seems to reduce the divine to a mere subject matter for human consciousness, but for that very reason, conversely it expands human consciousness into a vessel for the divine” (72).⁷ Yet, having perceived that Renaissance perspective can convey simultaneously understanding of the earthly and the divine, he also seems to perceive tension, wherein one aspect of the relationship (finite/infinite) may seem reduced by the other. He offers the observation, for example, that “whether one reproaches perspective for evapo-

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rating [verflüchtige] ‘true being’ into a mere manifestation of seen things, or rather for anchoring the free and, as it were, spiritual idea of form to a manifestation of mere seen things, is in the end little more than a question of emphasis” (71-2). Where earlier he seemed to see a balance, now he sees the spiritual becoming mere matter, its essence “evaporating.” Finally, in a similar vein, he concludes that this new perspective view of space is “the sign of a beginning, when modern ‘anthropocracy’ first reared itself” (72).

Certainly since Panofsky’s essay many have recognized a religious connotation to the use of a geometric space and many have not, choosing to see it as anthropocentric. Indeed, the ambiguity or tension in possible interpretations to which Panofsky seems sensitive has continued, the gap between one interpretive approach and another widening into fixed opposing positions. Yet there are ways of resolving such tension. One can see the inception of Renaissance perspective in terms of the divine “embodied in empirical reality,” and that it is not yet the beginning of an anthropocentric view. This choice is more in keeping with Alberti’s era and his intentions. To do this we need to look at an earthly/divine dynamic within the context of Alberti’s text, as few have done, including Panofsky. We also ought to seek beyond a supposition of geometry’s potential import to the way Alberti frames his discussion of it, looking there for evidence of symbolic meaning. Complementary to a study of Alberti’s text, we should explore his understanding of God as nature in painting of the early Renaissance, especially painting that preceded his writings and from which he admitted deriving his recognition of artistic greatness that stimulated the treatise On Painting. Finally, we need to seek evidence of a broader, shared epistemology of vision to substantiate this perception of a dialectic of physical and intellectual vision embodied in works of art, which may be found in the writings of the German theologian and scholar, Nicolaus Cusanus, particularly through his concept of a coincidence of opposites.

Some important background concepts should ground the discussion and set the context for bridging Panofsky’s notion of “symbolic form” with Alberti’s era. The early Renaissance inherited a well articulated belief that one knew about reality in two ways, through the senses and through the intellect. Sight was regarded as the highest of the senses, paramount for its ability to help physically negotiate God’s lumen, visible “luminous” space. Yet, the manifestations of existence through lumen were contingent upon the higher reality of lux. Where lumen was known by the outward sense as material light, lux was accessed by understanding God’s grace, the redemptive power spread evenly throughout creation --