ABSTRACT. The author represents Averintsev’s thought as a response to, and commentary on, Russia’s Silver Age, and describes his particular method of seeing and understanding. The article considers his response to the cultural context in which he worked, focusing mainly on Averintsev’s language, style and syntax, and linking it with his ideal of equilibrium. Finally, the article moves on to Averintsev’s criticism of thinking in polarities.

KEY WORDS: Silver Age, Aristotelian Golden Mean

“The present is so important because, but only because, through it the mysterious depth of the past and the mysterious breadth of the future reveal themselves through an encounter with one another.” 

Sergej Averintsev, from his ‘Two Thousand Years with Virgil.’

It seems to me that any serious discussion of Averintsev’s works must begin with an attempt to grasp his method. This is far from simple, but it is precisely this that is necessary. It is in his method that we discover Averintsev’s uniqueness, his utterly distinct position in contemporary scholarship in the humanities, not only within Russia but probably throughout the world. What we are left with after reading him are not so much concrete ‘results’ which we can subsequently ‘put to good use,’ but, rather, a method of seeing, understanding and then imparting our new insight to others. Averintsev leads us not to new ‘cultural phenomena’ (meanings, facts, concepts and so forth) but to a new way of seeing. In that respect, his effect on his readers resembles the effect created by a literary or other artist (as, say, Proust, who alters the sensibility of his readers so that they will never again perceive things in the way that they used to do). Of course, Averintsev acts upon the vision of the mind,
not of the eye. With Dante you have Beatrice teaching the
lesson of the path to concrete knowledge, not concrete knowl-
edge itself. What she conveys to her pupil Dante is a method of
understanding. Here is how to get across the stream of that
which is not understood: one moves from the bank of theo-
logical and cosmological premises to the bank of specific
meaning, using the stones of correctly constructed syllogisms.
Averintsev’s work *The Rhetoric and Sources of the European
Literary Tradition* takes his readers along a path leading from
the pre-reflective depth of ancient times through rhetorical
reflection to an age which has lost touch with metaphysics. In
this book of his he actually succeeds in constructing this great
three-fold historical progression.

Approaching his book *Poets,* which features some of
Averintsev’s small-scale essays, we can, as it were, leave to one
side such large matters as his method and its specific qualities. If
his large-scale works suggest the idiom of architecture, portrait
painting requires a different idiom. The portrait painter is closer
and more visible to the viewer than the architect tends to be.
Nevertheless, the ‘portraits’ of poets as executed by Averintsev
are, in their general proportions, linked to a great tradition
and also to the separate specific traditions embodied in those
proportions. Precisely this renders them essentially different in
kind from ‘normal’ monographs treating those same themes,
say, for example, Zhukovsky’s technique as a translator.
Averintsev is significantly less interested than are some philol-
ogists (unappealingly dubbed “specialists” in this or that) in
‘interiors,’ that is to say, in narrow studies focusing on one poet
and his interaction with his Russian and European cultural
milieu and his immediate predecessors. What he seeks to pro-
vide instead is a portrait of an artist within the whole edifice of
culture and, above all, he relates that figure to the most general
foundations of culture. For all that, Averintsev’s method does
not cease to be deductive. His move towards concrete detail
invariably begins from those very general meanings which tend
not to be part of the subject specialists’ vocabulary, or else do
not fit within their professional concern with a given author or
given work and are confined purely to their private perceptions