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 knowledge itself. What she conveys to her pupil Dante is a method of understanding.¹ Here is how to get across the stream of that which is not understood: one moves from the bank of theological 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 Tradition² 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,³ 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 philologists (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 provide 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.