KONSTANTIN SIGOV

AVERINTSEV'S ARCHIPELAGO: TOWARDS UNDERSTANDING THE ERA OF POST-ATHEISM

ABSTRACT. Drawing on MacIntyre's encyclopaedia–genealogy–tradition typology of the humanities, the author describes Averintsev's project as bringing together the elements of encyclopaedia and tradition. The article identifies three forms of isolationism which are evident not only in 'post-atheistic' societies but more widely, and comments on Averintev's treatment of these.

KEY WORDS: communication, dictionary, encyclopaedia, genealogy, isolationism, Post-Atheism, Sophia, tradition

Averintsev's world stands as a refutation of the misanthropic generalization which the poet Joseph Brodsky attributed to a modern Ulysses speaking to his son: "Telemachus, when you travel for so long, all islands resemble one another." Today a journey through the articles written by the late Academician Sergej Sergejevich Averintsev yields surprises not only on account of their variety, variety on a scale seldom encountered even in times more auspicious than the Soviet years. Quite apart from their own inherent qualities, these articles are striking due to the complete and utter absence of that all-pervasive atmosphere of terminally monotonous, featureless 'prose' characteristic of Party and state speeches, which set the tone for, and introduced, all dissertations and dictionaries belonging to that era, which marked all 'scholarly apparatus.' Hard as it may now be to believe, something as small as a single typographical error (the very telling substitution of one letter of the alphabet for another so that the word 'patri*o*tic' replaced 'patri*s*tic'!) is sufficient to call back to mind the specific nature

of censorship as it was applied in the 1960s, the time when Averintsev was writing his now classic work on Kiev's Holy Sophia Cathedral. Written in those difficult decades, hundreds of Averintsev's writings now reveal to us new horizons of the inexhaustibly rich world that he inhabited.

Offering the foundations of Christian culture within the form of an encyclopaedic dictionary amounts to an impressive alternative to the ''lies placed in alphabetical order'' for which Soviet encyclopaedias were notorious. Sergej Averintsev's *Dictionary* imparts to the reader not only a universal body of knowledge from A to Z, but also the very energy of his personal choices and interpretation, beginning with the 'narrow path' pursued by Abraham, that eminent embodiment of Old Testament faith, and also taking in 'Paganism' and the 'broad path' of its numerous 'post-atheistic' manifestations. Articles which first appeared in Soviet publications such as the five-volume *Philosophical Encyclopaedia*, the seven-volume *Short Literary Encyclopaedia*, the two-volume *Myths of Peoples of the World* and the three-volume publication *Christianity* – which have elicited great praise from relevant subject specialists – are for the very first time collected in one place.

The synthesis achieved by Averintsev's *Dictionary*[1] reveals particular qualities of the various elements within it which had previously been obscured by being torn from their full and proper context and, also, by being isolated from one another by the thick fog of ideology present in the Soviet editions. Readers would experience a genuine shock when, in the empty waters of the *Great Soviet Encyclopaedia*, they suddenly encountered that great rock of an article which Averintsev's entry on *Logos* represents or, indeed, his entry on *Love*. It's a matter of unforgettable encounters: amid the gloom of half-truths and in an ocean of would-be knowledge, scattered here and there you find articles by this master-encyclopaedist, and they stand out clearly as high and hope-inducing islands of a particularly lofty kind, marked by very particular, crystal-clear thought. Now that we can take in these articles together, within the covers of a single volume, we have, in effect, a map which points us to Averintsev's Archipelago.

In addition to his *Dictionary*, a number of more recent articles go to make up a further volume, entitled *Sophia-Logos*,[2] and here the Averintsev ethos continues its enduring battle against slavish habits of thought and speech, against the impersonal 'boundlessness' of the Gulag archipelago which, to this very day, mangles our language, be it in our parliament and the media or in the family and in school. Averintsev's encyclopaedia articles not only belong to the golden store of scholarly knowledge; to a significant extent they also broaden the historical experience of overcoming totalitarian ideocracy.

When, on 1 September 1998, he was awarded a professorship *honoris causa* by the Kiev–Mohyla Academy, Averintsev delivered an address on the theme of Sophia. On that occasion he affirmed: "To my mind it seems impossible to pronounce the name of the city of Kiev without thinking of its most sacred building, the Holy Sophia Cathedral." Against the background of the wars and catastrophes of the twentieth century, surely one of the most 'anti-Sophianic' centuries in world history, Sergej Averintsev's ground-breaking research into the subject of Sophia represents a new page in human reflection on 'the principle of Wisdom.'

Emulating Averintsev's own working method, let us recall the etymology of the word 'archipelago.' The initial meaning of the word was not 'a group of islands' but 'sea' or 'main sea' (from the Greek *arche* meaning 'beginning' and 'head,' and *pelagos* meaning 'sea'; in other words, 'the sea of seas' and first, simply, the Aegean Sea). For our purposes this *twofold* meaning of the word – both 'sea' and 'island' – is especially pertinent. This twofold term will help us to reveal the deep leitmotif underlying Averintsev's 'love of wisdom' (literally 'philo-sophia'), that is, the striving to overcome the multiple forms which isolationism takes, be it ethnic, class-based, confessional, linguistic or historical isolationism. Studying the nature of the abundant shoots and manifestations of isolationism, this scholar was able to bring to light the meta-historical root of the phenomenon; hence the deep insight of his assertions regarding the hidden hotbeds of infection affecting society and also his move beyond the

clinical symptoms which 'closed societies' reveal to a genuine diagnosis.

Analysing the 'tendency of the age' in which the Iron Curtain and the Berlin Wall both became possible, Averintsev touches on a problem not normally mentioned by specialists on the Cold War. "With what is this tendency of the age connected?" Here is the question which Averintsev poses. His response takes the following form: "Whereas it would be easiest to reply 'Due to hedonism' or 'Due to consumerism,' at the root of the whole matter there lies a certain metaphysical isolationism which seeks to bring about a separation between the Creator and His creation, between creation and the Creator, a separation between us and the Creator, us and the cosmos and, also, separation among ourselves, setting us one against the other." In order to get a better grasp of the problem of metaphysical isolationism, let us call to mind the initial 'physical' root of this word: *isola*, the Italian for 'island' (French: 'île'), coming from the Latin *insula* . Thus, 'to isolate oneself' (literally, 'to present oneself as an island') is a dead-end utopia for an individual person, quite regardless of how 'separate' he might conceive himself to be. Not only the individual but humanity as a whole is addressed in the very title of one of Averintsev's essays, 'No Man is an Island' (Item No. 233 in the bibliography of his published works www.duh-i-litera.kiev.ua).

The excesses of 'insular psychology' and the acquired reflexes of group-based isolationism cut mankind off from paths to communication, from the very possibility of listening, being listened to and heard. Three forms of isolationism are characteristic of our age. A mild form of it consists in claiming some exclusive status for one's own 'island' in relation to other parts of the world. In its extreme form isolationism goes so far as to reject the 'archipelago' altogether, that is, to reject the historically given space for communication among 'islands.' Then, thirdly, the metaphysical form of isolationism rejects the divine-human element of Wisdom, the Sophianic link between things and their names.

In Averintsev's writings opposition to isolationism takes a positive direction: it amounts to a concentrated effort to

re-establish the word as a means of communication and as a connecting principle in an extremely atomized society.

Is this a philosophy of post-communism? It would be more accurate to call it the first profound analysis of 'the post-atheistic situation.' The USSR represented a declaration of the victory of what, relatively speaking, could be called 'atheism from above': coming down not only from the Central Committee and all the serried ranks of Party adherents, but also from the European intellectual 'summit' of Marx, Nietzsche, Positivism, and so forth.[3]

Another threat is, again relatively speaking, 'atheism from below.' This is not state atheism, nor scientific atheism, nor intellectual atheism. Here we have a creeping distrust in relation to meaning as such, to the word, to the major key and the minor key, to distinct and luminous openness as a real, living alternative to 'the nightmare of total indistinctness.'

In his essays 'The Future of Christianity in Europe' and 'The Word of God and the Word of Man' Averintsev provides a strikingly accurate analysis of our 'post-atheistic situation': "At the present time belief in Revelation is countered by an entirely new challenge, one which has come to take the place of moribund atheism, that is, a lack of belief in the word as such, a hostility towards Logos ...."[4] The old revolutionary claims to cut off earth from heaven have given way to distrust regarding the existence of any connection at all amongst those left here on this bare earth. If, according to unverified but persistent rumours, marriages are no longer confirmed in heaven, the large question remains as to where they are confirmed and, indeed, as to where humankind will find the capacity to accept with total seriousness the marital precept "There is no salvation outside the Other."[5] What we have today is suspicion in relation to others, fear of a binding and obligatory relation to another being, and fear of a word given, a word which binds me to another.

In destruction of the word Averintsev is conscious of, almost senses physically, the corrupting will of non-being. Indeed, being is defined, first and foremost, by its rootedness in the word, by its fundamental relationship to communication. Communication is

not the exclusive privilege of human society; it pertains to being as such. "The Creator brought creation into existence by relating to things – I would even dare to say by 'conversing' with them; and they began to exist because existence *is* being present within a conversation, within communication."[6]

There are three competing tendencies in the humanities at present, identified by Alasdair MacIntyre as the Encyclopaedia, Genealogy and Tradition.[7] The first of these tendencies is reflected in textbooks and encyclopaedias in all the world's languages, and it goes back to the French authors of the Encyclopaedia and to other fathers of the Age of Enlightenment and of modernity. In many respects the second tendency represents a critical reaction to the first on the part of those who admire Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morals* or, representing postmodernism, Michel Foucault's *Archaeology of Knowledge*. The third tendency, which takes into account the experience of the first and the second while refraining from making their axioms absolute, is oriented towards the classical inheritance of the ancient world and of Christianity (Aristotle and neo-Thomism in the case of MacIntyre, and the neo-Patristic synthesis in the case of Christos Yannaras and others).

In the modern humanities Averintsev's *Dictionary* represents the most serious and noteworthy corrective to such a typology. It brings the first and the third elements surprisingly close together, namely the Encyclopaedia and Tradition. The strength of Averintsev's thesis is evident in the following decisive change which habitual concepts, long reinforced by 'school' routine, underwent as a result of his approach: rejecting the old juxtaposition of 'the Encyclopaedia versus Tradition,' Averintsev pointed to the possibility of making real another kind of project, namely that of affirming Tradition by means of an Encyclopaedia. He highlighted the fruitfulness of transmitting the treasures of tradition in encyclopaedia form. Readers of his *Dictionary* may judge for themselves the wealth of the results springing from this original methodological discovery: the entries there (the dictionary-type definitions and also the more extensive articles) stand out for their laconic conciseness, their impartiality of tone and their striving for synthesis. When

applied to Averintsev the clichéd notion of 'scholarly encyclo-paedist' acquires a special and enhanced positive resonance. Let us also note the following important features of his *Dictionary*: its openness and also the absence of any claim to totality.

If Averintsev's *Dictionary* constitutes a natural, sustaining and beneficial medium for the metaphorical 'drawing together' of our cultural world and his 'archipelago,' the most compelling evidence in favour of the practical applicability of this working metaphor is surely to be found in the bibliography listing his publications, which exceed eight hundred items. Here is a plethora of 'islands,' each with its own contours and configuration, some situated close to us and others distant but never-theless exerting their potent attractive power. Long-time readers of his work have had plenty of previous occasions to discover that 'From the point of view of method Averintsev is sound.' New readers who come upon his *Dictionary* may find that the book serves as some kind of a compass in the impen-etrable dark of their post-Soviet odyssey.

In our cramped and pressured world is it possible to find room for the free and capacious world of Averintsev?

Work on compilation of the *Dictionary* took place in the most auspicious circumstances, virtually miraculous ones. If we ac-cept that a miracle is 'not only a grace shown to a few people, but a sign shown to all' (as Averintsev's entry on *Miracle* affirms), then this very timely and important publication is indeed a 'sign shown to all,' as we emerge from a century of 'Egyptian slavery' and move forward into the expanse of a new millennium.

What makes Averintsev's world a fully real world – not a cerebral fiction but a world in which it is possible to live, breathe, walk upright and make out one's own path? Towards what kind of 'reality' is his world oriented? An adequate re-sponse to that very question may be found in Averintsev's Address to the staff and students of the Kiev–Mohyla Academy in September 1998: "The reality which can properly and absolutely accurately be referred to as 'Sophianic' is neither purely divine, nor purely human. It is neither Transcendence nor immanence. William Blake captured the essence of it when he alluded to 'the human-divine image'."

Students are a practically-minded set of people, and long ago
they assessed Averintsev in the following terms: 'Reading aloud
a page of Averintsev does the throat good, and reading a whole
article clears the eyes, opening up the full scale and volume of
our subject matter.' A slow and close reading of Averintsev's
measured, logos-infused prose is conducive to becoming
cured of ignorance and of impairment in one's ways of self-
expression. Many scholars and postgraduate research students
have learnt from his writings, his classical idiom, and in the
future many others will doubtless learn to write coherently,
taking their bearings from him. The main point is to conceive
one's own subject in clear categories and not to use false pathos
or deceptive profundity of thought as means to shield oneself
from one's discerning and demanding readers.

Finally, this new publication by Averintsev could itself be
viewed as the logical refutation of his own somewhat bitter
observation: "While we build bridges over the rivers of igno-
rance, they change their course, and consequently the new
generation will enter a world which is entirely lacking in hier-
archical, *a priori* foundations." Averintsev considered the issue
of conflict between generations, of disputes between 'fathers'
and 'sons,' in the broadest possible terms, attaching significance
to a range of cultural factors which were wholly absent from the
often shallow reflection which passes for adequate treatment of
the subject. As he put the matter: "In itself and by its own
nature, the totalitarianism of the twentieth century only had and
only has the chance to succeed in the context of a deep cultural –
or, more broadly – anthropological crisis, evident wherever the
forces of totalitarianism are not capable of securing a political
victory. Above all, this crisis affects the link between fathers and
sons, the continuity of generations, the psychological possibility
for fathers to exercise authority and for those who follow them
to accept the values offered by that authority."[8]

The application of concentrated and sustained attention to
history's torn threads reveals what, for Averintsev, became a
personal *credo*, affording a perspective that also goes beyond
the personal dimension: "The point is that, for me, given the
person I am, the question of my lived and my living experience

of the relationship to my late parents, to my wife, to my children, is too inextricably linked to another question, namely, 'Why do I actually believe in God?' For me this experience is itself the most weighty and compelling evidence for the existence of God."[9]

The kind of witness represented by relationships among people, relationships which are absolutely unique and which cannot be replaced or substituted by anyone or anything else whatsoever, has a clarity which allows it to supersede the old and formulaic ontological 'proofs' for the existence of God advanced by theologians and philosophers. Until the experience undergone by the final three generations living in the twentieth century, it would have been hard to imagine such a truly striking contrast and clarity as that between the theologians' and philosophers' 'ontological' proofs on the one hand and 'the most weighty proof' of God's existence on the other, which latter proof is open to us also. At least, it would have been hard to imagine that on the far side of the ruins of 'a-theology.'

Translated from Russian by Jonathan Sutton

NOTES

[1] See www.duh-i-litera.kiev.ua, Averintsev, S.S., *Slovar' protiv lzhi v alfavitnom poryadke* (Kiev, *Dukhi i litera*, 2001). [*Dictionary against Lies in Alphabetical Order*]

[2] Averintsev, S.S., *Sofiya-Logos: Slovar'* (Kiev, *Dukh i litera*, 2006).

[3] MacIntyre, Alasdair & Ricoeur, Paul, See *The Religious Significance of Atheism* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1969).

[4] Averintsev, S., Sophia-Logos. Dictionary, Kiev, 2006, p. 827.

[5] *Ibid.*, 800.

[6] *Ibid.*, 816.

[7] MacIntyre, Alasdair, Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry Encyclopaedia, Genealogy and Tradition, Nôtre Dame, Indiana, 1990.

[8] *Ibid.*, 389, p. 649

[9] *Op. cit.*, 796

Dukh i litera
vul. Volos'ka, 8/5
04070 Kiev
Ukraine
E-mail: litera@ukma.kiev.ua