

Cults and Culture.

Late Soviet Cultural Studies as Intellectual and Social Practice



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**Cults and Culture. Late Soviet Cultural Studies as Intellectual and Social Practice**

**SHORT ABSTRACT**

This thesis explores the history of the late Soviet academic intelligentsia through the cases of prominent intellectuals Aleksei Losev and Sergei Averintsev. I focus on the intersection of theoretical, symbolic, and social structures: first, theories of culture alternative to official Marxism; second, intellectual cults that combine symbolic work to endow a chosen figure with exceptional cultural value and social work to form a community of admirers who share certain emotional and intellectual attitudes; and third, informal intellectual circles (*kruzhki*), small semi-official groups linked by personal relationships and common interests, where intellectual hierarchies were established and the subjectivity of the late Soviet intelligentsia was shaped. My goal is to analyse how the intellectual and social strategies used by Losev and Averintsev defined the forms of their recognition and popularity in the 1960s–1980s and the ways of instrumentalising their intellectual legacy in the 1990s–2010s.

I work with three main types of sources: scholarly texts, memoirs, and long oral history interviews that I collected for this research (twenty in total). This variety of sources helps me establish connections between intellectual labour and its social context.

With this research, I offer a new approach to late Soviet intellectual culture, bridging intellectual and cultural history and adding methodological tools of sociology and oral history. It allows me not only to describe in detail the social and symbolic mechanics of two types of cult-building in the late Soviet period, but also to explore the current problems of producing humanitarian knowledge in conditions of limited freedom of expression. I aim to contribute to the contemporary discussion about the Russian intelligentsia, its moral struggles and political compromises, which ultimately led to the defeat of humanistic values in the face of aggressive revanchism.

## LONG ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the history of the late Soviet academic intelligentsia through the cases of prominent intellectuals Aleksei Losev and Sergei Averintsev. I focus on the intersection of theoretical, symbolic, and social structures: first, theories of culture alternative to official Marxism; second, intellectual cults that combine symbolic work to endow a chosen figure with exceptional cultural value and social work to form a community of admirers who share certain emotional and intellectual attitudes; and third, informal intellectual circles (*kruzhki*), small semi-official groups linked by personal relationships and common interests, where intellectual hierarchies were established and the subjectivity of the late Soviet intelligentsia was shaped. My goal is to analyse how the intellectual and social strategies used by Losev and Averintsev defined the forms of their recognition and popularity in the 1960s–1980s and the ways of instrumentalising their intellectual legacy in the 1990s–2010s.

I work with three main types of sources: scholarly texts, memoirs and oral history interviews I collected for this research (twenty in total, ranging in duration from 50 minutes to 2 hours and 24 minutes). Such a variety of sources helps me establish connections between intellectual labour and its social context. Methodologically, I draw on Pierre Bourdieu's sociology of knowledge (his work *The Political Ontology of Martin Heidegger* served as a guide for my work), as well as historical studies of Soviet informal institutions by Barbara Walker, Polly Jones, Ilya Kukulin, and others.

My dissertation consists of an introduction, two main chapters, and a conclusion. In the introduction, I pose the research question, briefly introduce my protagonists, review the relevant research literature and methodology, and also describe in detail my sources and my approach to them. The first chapter focuses on Aleksei Losev and his *kruzhok*, whose members were involved both in the facilitation of his work and promotion of his cult. The second chapter is about Sergei Averintsev, who relied on public recognition rather than on personal relationships within a close circle of followers. In the conclusion, I compare the intellectual and social strategies of Losev and Averintsev and show how they determined the fate of their legacy in the post-Soviet era.

Chapter one ‘Aleksei Losev and his *kruzhok*’ discusses Losev as a cult intellectual at the centre of his *kruzhok*. In the first section, ‘The Eclecticism of Theory and the Wholeness of Thought,’ I analyse Losev’s intellectual strategy through his theoretical texts, reconstructing his theory of culture, and examining his tactics of using Marxism and inscribing said tactics into the context of Soviet academic polemics. Firstly, I reconstruct his holistic approach to culture, which regards various elements of a given culture as expressions of a single fundamental principle (‘sensory-material cosmologism’ for the ancient culture, ‘secular Neo-Platonism’ for the Renaissance culture). This holistic approach is close to Spenglerian philosophy; however, in Losev’s work, it is paired with Hegelian-Marxist dialectics of history and is positioned as an attempt at a disciplinary synthesis of philosophy, philology and history. I show that members of his *kruzhok* further explicated and reinforced his claim to disciplinary synthesis, arguing that he was not only a thinker who merged various approaches, but also a Teacher, who provided a guidance for life.

Secondly, I examine Losev’s three tactics of engaging with Marxism: using Marxist rhetorics in a complex intellectual game, combining parody and the defence of his original intellectual work in ideological terms; using and developing Marxist concepts in his philosophical critique of Western individualism; and adopting the Marxist dialectical method to create a complex conception of culture.

In the second section, ‘The Circulation of Charisma,’ based on oral history interviews and memoirs, I describe how Losev’s *kruzhok* functioned in the 1960s–80s. I consider him as the social and symbolic centre of the *kruzhok* that brought together people with very different academic positions and political views. Then, I focus on the efforts of Losev’s second wife, Aza Takho-Godi, to institutionalise his charisma and shape his cult and canonical interpretations of his philosophy. Finally, I discuss the collective labour of Losev’s secretaries and assistants, who facilitated his work, prepared manuscripts, and contributed to posthumous editions, ensuring that Losev’s philosophical legacy outlived him. Furthermore, I examine in detail their attempts to inherit that legacy: Vladimir Bibikhin sought to emulate Losev’s personal charisma, Gasan Gusejnov employed Losev’s

intellectual techniques in his work, and Igor' Makhan'kov strove to gain control of the 'Losev House' Library.

In the third section, 'The Intellectual Cult and the Process of Canonisation,' I analyse Losev's cult, from the circle-based forms of veneration and commemoration following his death to his establishment as the 'last philosopher of the Silver Age' within the Russian philosophical canon. I trace this process of canonisation and demonstrate that scholars from his *kruzhok* managed to impose their interpretations of Losev's life and work as canonical through engagement with key Russian philosophical centres, publication in textbooks and encyclopaedias, and the creation of memorial and research institutions.

Chapter two 'Sergei Averintsev as an intellectual star' is focused on Averintsev's intellectual and public career. In the first section, 'The Intellectual Strategy,' I examine his way of combining a demonstrative disregard for Marxism with skilful navigation of Soviet academia. I analyse his approach to culture, which relied on the search for key concepts and symbols in classical texts that constituted the normative foundations of 'worldview types.' Unlike Losev, who aimed to identify the fundamental principle, Averintsev was more interested in 'the crossroads,' that is, the intersections, oppositions, or interactions between different cultures.

In the second section, 'The Intellectual Cult,' I study the formation and functioning of Averintsev's cult. I view his public lectures from the late 1960s and early 1970s as 'events,' that is, phenomena that broke with the Soviet symbolic order and were perceived by his audience as extraordinary, vivid and sincere. I analyse his lecturing style and tactics of self-presentation, as well as the characteristic aspiration intonation [*pridykhaniie*] used by his admirers to express their reverence and admiration. I also examine the decline of his cult, which was determined by the post-Soviet transformation of the intellectual environment; Averintsev's own intellectual strategy; his departure from Russia; and the lack of followers willing to promote his ideas after his death.

In the third section, 'The Public Intellectual,' I examine Averintsev's public activity from the late 1980s until his death in 2004. I trace how he transformed his cult status into recognition by a wider audience, participating in political debates and assuming the role of a defender of culture. I also show how Averintsev consistently sought to occupy a 'reasonable' middle ground between two extremes: liberals and nationalists in politics, or reformism and traditionalism in the Russian Orthodox Church. And after his death, it was the Church that attempted to preserve and use his symbolic capital.

In the conclusion, 'The priests of culture,' I compare the intellectual and social strategies of Losev and Averintsev. I argue that understanding late Soviet intellectual life in its complexity requires attention to the interaction of theoretical, social, and symbolic factors. Late Soviet cultural research was considered by its authors and audiences as an intellectual alternative to Marxism, even though it continued to engage with it in different ways (through Losev's conceptual reworking or Averintsev's conscious disregard). Those who preserved and studied culture were perceived as a kind of priest or guide, granting others access to 'other worlds.' Their followers regarded them as exceptional figures: in Losev's case, they formed a *kruzhok* and worked collectively to preserve and augment their Teacher's symbolic capital; in Averintsev's case, they belonged to a broader audience, admiring him as an intellectual star. However, in both instances, social and intellectual strategies corresponded to each other.

With this research, I offer a new approach to late Soviet intellectual culture, bridging intellectual and cultural history and adding methodological tools of sociology and oral history. It allows me not only to analyse in detail the social and symbolic mechanics of two types of cult-building in the late Soviet period, but also to explore the current problems of producing humanitarian knowledge in conditions of limited freedom of expression. I aim to contribute to the contemporary discussion about the Russian intelligentsia, its moral struggles and political compromises, which ultimately led to the defeat of humanistic values in the face of aggressive revanchism.

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To my mother, Olga Sokolova, whose love and care have always been a source of my strength, I dedicate this work.

## **NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION**

I use the Library of Congress transliteration system (ALA-LC) for Russian throughout the text. Exceptions are made for the names of people that have established English forms, as well as for my informants and scholars who have Latinised forms of their names (for example, Gasan Gusejnov). As I mention many scholars who are still actively publishing, this approach has resulted in some inconsistencies (for example, name Александр may be transliterated as either Aleksandr or Alexander); nevertheless, I believe it right to use the spellings that they themselves prefer.

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## INTRODUCTION

The soul leaves through the heels and returns through the palms! I understood this clearly when I experienced clinical death. Just know this!

Losev, Averintsev — rare people. From that minority to whom the Truth is revealed.

Why so few views, who hath ears to hear, let him hear... my deepest bow!!!! ♥♥♥♥

an astonishing conversation

A Genius [speaks] about a Genius of Suffering and Power!!!

These are the first five comments beneath the YouTube video of an interview in which one of the protagonists of my dissertation, Sergei Averintsev, speaks about the other, Aleksei Losev.<sup>1</sup> Both were philosophers and philologists, prominent representatives of the academic intelligentsia of the 1960s to 1980s, who greatly influenced the intellectual landscape of post-Soviet Russia. Yet these comments appear to go far beyond admiration for their intellectual work on ancient philosophy or Byzantine theology. They make excessive use of exclamation marks and capitalisation to express awe and emphasise the exceptional status of Losev and Averintsev as philosophers ('to whom the Truth is revealed'), and as personalities. One commentator conveys their excitement in an unusually broad register, combining a biblical quotation ('Who hath ears to hear, let him hear,' Matthew 13:9) with multiple emojis, while another even recounts a near-death experience. What, one might

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<sup>1</sup> Sila. S.S. *Averintsev ob A.F. Loseve*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dtdgWy24EqI&t=2s>. The video is posted on the YouTube channel of the Faculty of Philosophy of Moscow State University. The five comments cited above are the first as of 1 February 2026; all of them were posted in the 2020s (over nearly thirteen years, the video has accumulated 24,800 views and 44 comments). The printed version of the interview: Sergei Averintsev, "O sile A.F. Loseva... Beseda Iu.A. Rostovtseva s S.S. Averintsevym," in *Aleksei Fedorovich Losev : iz tvorcheskogo nasledii : sovremenniki o myslitele* (Russkii mir, 2007).

reasonably ask, does the claim that ‘the soul leaves through the heels and returns through the palms’ have to do with the recollections of one late Soviet scholar about another?

The answer is that their followers and admirers perceived them not merely as scholars, but as intellectual authorities and moral leaders who taught them not only how to think but also how to live. Intellectual cults formed around these two figures. Such cults are complex structures that combine symbolic work to endow a chosen figure with exceptional cultural value, and to produce canonical biographical narratives and interpretations of their thought, and social work to form a community of admirers sharing key emotional and intellectual dispositions. The ways of conceptualising culture that the two scholars developed not only constituted theoretical alternatives to Soviet Marxism, but also became a means of initiating their audiences into ‘true’ culture (European or pre-revolutionary Russian). The ‘genius’ authors themselves came to be perceived by their followers not so much as researchers of culture, as its symbols, embodying the highest cultural values — hence the curious mixture of death, Bible, Truth, Suffering, Power, and ♥ in the comments. It is precisely such entanglements of symbolic and theoretical forms, as well as complex personal and social relations underlying them, that are the focus of this study.

In what follows, I examine the intellectual history of the late Soviet academic intelligentsia through case studies of Aleksei Losev and Sergei Averintsev. I focus on the intersection of theoretical, symbolic, and social structures, analysing in conjunction (1) theories of culture as alternatives to official Marxism;<sup>2</sup> (2) cults as practices of veneration and canonisation of intellectuals; and (3) intellectual circles or *kruzhki*, informal groups linked by personal relationships and shared interests, in which these cults were developed. I analyse how the intellectual and social strategies used by Losev and Averintsev defined the different forms of their recognition and popularity in the 1960s–1980s and the instrumentalisations of their

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<sup>2</sup> In this research, I deal mainly with official Marxism as it existed within Soviet academia in the 1960s–1980s (I usually use formulations such as ‘official Marxism’ or ‘Marxist orthodoxy’). It is this form of Marxism that Aleksei Losev redefined and developed (see pp. 59–72) and Sergei Averintsev demonstratively ignored (see pp. 137–151). I do not examine here alternative currents of Marxist thought that developed in the second half of the twentieth century, either in the Soviet Union or in the West.

intellectual legacies in the 1990s–2010s. The relevance of studying these cases extends beyond a better understanding of specific episodes in late Soviet intellectual history. Rather, through these cases, we can examine a range of broader issues, such as the often-overlooked collective dimension of intellectual work; moral and political controversies in academia; tactics of (dis)engagement with authoritative discourse; and the complex relations between liberal and conservative factions of the Soviet and post-Soviet intelligentsia. Thus, this thesis aims to contribute not only to late Soviet history but also to understanding the contemporary Russian intellectual landscape, insofar as it inherits and adapts late Soviet conceptual and social forms.

### **Aleksei Losev and Sergei Averintsev**

Aleksei Fedorovich Losev (1893–1988) is one of the most intriguing figures in Soviet intellectual history. His philosophical career spanned the entire ‘short twentieth century,’ from the mid-1910s, when he graduated from Moscow University, until his death in the late 1980s, by which time he had attained the status of an undisputed philosophical authority. From the very beginning, he combined studies of ancient philosophy with the writing of original religious-philosophical treatises. In 1930, after the publication of what became probably his most famous book, *Dialectics of Myth* [*Dialektika mifa*], he was arrested as a participant in a counter-revolutionary organisation and sentenced to ten years’ imprisonment. However, he was released by 1932 and was soon able to return to teaching at Moscow universities.<sup>3</sup> In the late 1950s, Losev regained the opportunity to publish and worked with extraordinary productivity until the late 1980s, despite the gradual loss of his eyesight as a result of camp imprisonment. The principal works of this period that I will analyse are the monumental *History of Ancient Aesthetics* [*Istoriia antichnoi estetiki*], published over the course of thirty years (1963–1994), and *Aesthetics of the Renaissance* [*Estetika Vozrozhdeniia*, 1978], which provoked intense debates in the early 1980s. From the

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<sup>3</sup> Aza Takho-Godi, “Khronika osnovnykh sobytii zhizni i tvorchestva,” in Aleksei Fedorovich Losev, ed. Aza Takho-Godi and Elena Takho-Godi (Rossiiskaia politicheskaia entsiklopediia (ROSSPEN), 2009), 298.

1960s onwards, students and followers who gathered around him formed a circle, or *kruzhok* — a relatively small, unofficial group of people, who perceived him as a charismatic Teacher. Led by his second wife, Aza Takho-Godi, the members of the *kruzhok* facilitated his work during his lifetime, assisting him with reading and writing, and after his death, preserved his intellectual legacy and promoted his philosophy within Russian academia and the public sphere.

Sergei Sergeevich Averintsev (1937–2004) was a renowned philologist and cultural scholar. In 1961, he graduated from the Classical Department of the Philological Faculty of Moscow State University, and just a decade later, he was already drawing large audiences to his lectures on Byzantine aesthetics, which became a notable cultural event. These lectures made him a star: not merely a scholar, but an intellectual and moral authority who opened access to the ‘treasures’ of Christian culture for his audience. I analyse these lectures as an event, as well as his main book, *Poetics of Early Byzantine Literature* [*Poetika rannevizantiiskoi literatury*, 1977], which was based on them. Averintsev made a successful academic career and, from the late 1980s, used his symbolic capital to participate as a public intellectual in political and religious controversies. During the last ten years of his life, he worked as Professor of Russian Literature at the University of Vienna, while continuing to articulate a conservative critique of ‘ultra-secularist’ liberalism. After his death, although his name remained significant within Russian humanities, the absence of direct disciples willing to preserve and promote his legacy led to the gradual decline of his intellectual cult. The question of why the intellectual cults of Losev and Averintsev developed such different trajectories in post-Soviet Russia is key to this study.

Losev and Averintsev were in many ways similar and connected by various ties. First, both were engaged in highly ambitious intellectual work that transcended disciplinary boundaries, combining philosophy, history, philology, and even theology, and aimed not so much to address specific research problems as to offer a philosophical analysis of entire historical periods, uncovering their ‘integral principle’ or ‘structures of meaning.’ Both developed original and holistic approaches to the study of culture as alternatives to official

Marxism. Second, both functioned as cultural heroes for the late Soviet intelligentsia (liberal and conservative alike), guardians of cultural tradition and guides who opened access to the ‘treasures’ of pre-revolutionary Russian or European cultures for their listeners and readers. They established connections with these other cultural worlds in different ways: Losev, albeit at the very beginning of his career, was indeed part of the late Imperial philosophical community, while Averintsev, who was born in 1937, claimed his ties to the Silver Age through his father. However, for their respective (and partly shared) followers and admirers, these connections were equally vital. Thirdly, both engaged not only in research but also in religiously charged criticism of modern Western culture’s individualism and secularism. Both were devout Christians, and their religiosity to some extent shaped their intellectual work. Fourthly, they did not merely know each other personally; Averintsev was part of Losev’s circle and called him his teacher.<sup>4</sup> In the mid-1960s, they would have intense intellectual conversations, which Averintsev later described as follows:

I remember how I had just written an entry entitled ‘Orthodoxy’ for the fourth volume of the Philosophical Encyclopaedia. [...] Aleksei Fedorovich was very excited. Our conversation continued until one o’clock in the morning or half past one. Then I was horrified that I was taking away the night hours of a man of such advanced age and respectfully said goodbye. But then I was called back from the stairs several times with cries of ‘Sergei! Come back! Have you read such-and-such article by Florenskii?’ [...] And if it hadn’t been for the vigour of Aza Alibekovna [Takho-Godi], the conversation would have continued until dawn.<sup>5</sup>

In addition, their circles overlapped, and some of my oral history informants (Gasan Gusejnov, Aleksandr Dobrokhoto and Nikolai Shaburov) had personal relations with both of them. And finally, both remained important figures in post-Soviet Russia, as scholars whose

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<sup>4</sup> Sergei Averintsev, “Pamiati uchitelia,” in *Kontekst. Literaturno-teoreticheskie issledovaniia* (Nauka, 1990), 3.

<sup>5</sup> Sila. S.S. *Averintsev ob A.F. Loseve.*

work largely defined Russian cultural research ('culturology'), but also as inspiring personalities for many of their followers and admirers.

At its core, my thesis is a study of how two charismatic intellectuals, similar in many respects and inspiring similar awe among their admirers, chose differing social strategies and thereby largely determined the fate of their intellectual legacy. Aleksei Losev and Sergei Averintsev became cult figures: that is, symbols embodying the values and cultural ideals of a significant part of the late Soviet academic intelligentsia. This, in turn, makes these intellectuals and their milieu part of the broader history of the Russian intelligentsia in post-Soviet times too.

There is an extensive body of scholarly literature on Losev's philosophy, primarily in Russian. The bibliographic index compiled by the staff of the 'Losev House' Library already contained more than sixteen hundred texts on his life and work by 2013.<sup>6</sup> This list is incomplete — it does not include some of the most critical texts, such as those by Leonid Katsis, who accused Losev of anti-Semitism;<sup>7</sup> and since it was compiled, many new studies have appeared. The most significant part of that corpus, including the most profound and original studies, has been carried out by researchers close to Losev's circle or who at least follow the interpretations of his philosophy developed within that circle.<sup>8</sup> For example, in a collection of articles on Losev edited by Aza Takho-Godi and published in a series of books on

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<sup>6</sup> Aleksei Fedorovich Losev: *Biobibliograficheskii ukazatel'. K 120-letiiu so dnia rozhdeniia* (Dizain I poligrafiia, 2013), 102–242.

<sup>7</sup> Leonid Katsis, "O novom tekste," *Segodnia*, October 18, 1996; Leonid Katsis, "Neskol'ko dopolnenii k diskussii o 'Dopolneniiakh k "Dialektike mifa" A. F. Loseva,'" *Neprikosnovennyi zapas*, no. 1 (1999); Leonid Katsis, "Dialektika dlia veruiushchikh i neveruiushchikh: Emelian Iaroslavskii, Aleksei Losev, o. Pavel Florenskii, Mark Mitin (1927–1933)," in *Issledovaniia po istorii russkoi mysli [13]: Ezhegodnik za 2016–2017 gody*, ed. Modest Kolerov (Modest Kolerov, 2017).

<sup>8</sup> Particularly insightful studies include: Gasan Gusejnov, "Lichnost' misticheskaiia i akademicheskaiia: A.F. Losev o «lichnosti»," *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie*, no. 6 (2005), <https://magazines.gorky.media/nlo/2005/6/lichnost-misticheskaya-i-akademicheskaya-a-f-losev-o-lichnosti.html>; Liudmila Gogotishvili, "Eideticheskii iazyk (rekonstruktsiia i interpretatsiia radikal'noi fenomenologicheskoi novatsii A.F. Loseva)," in *Nepriamoe govorenie* (Iazyki slavianskikh kul'tur, 2006); Aleksandr Dobrokhotov, "A. F. Losev — filosof kul'tury," in *Aleksei Fedorovich Losev*, ed. Aza Takho-Godi and Elena Takho-Godi (Rossiiskaia politicheskaiia entsiklopediia (ROSSPEN), 2009).

philosophers of the second half of the twentieth century, he is presented as a radically non-Soviet author, ‘the last philosopher of the Silver Age,’ an encyclopaedic thinker<sup>9</sup> who developed the dialectics of Plato and Hegel (instead of ‘Marxist pseudo-Hegelianism’)<sup>10</sup> and bridged them with the Orthodox ascetic tradition.<sup>11</sup>

Such interpretations of Losev’s work, which embed him in the tradition of Russian religious philosophy and therefore focus primarily on its early period while ignoring the Soviet intellectual and academic context, are grounded in the émigré version of the history of Russian philosophy. For example, the émigré Vasilii Zenkovskii, in *The History of Russian Philosophy* [*Istoriia russkoi filosofii*, 1948], relying only on several of Losev’s works from the 1920s, offers an interpretation of his philosophy that was subsequently reproduced in many later studies, arguing that Losev followed Vladimir Solov’ev’s ‘philosophical intuitions,’ drew on the religious philosophy of Sergei Bulgakov and Pavel Florenskii, and adhered to Christian Platonism.<sup>12</sup> Zenkovskii was also amongst the first to claim that Losev’s ‘true thought’ had been distorted by Soviet censorship:

Regarding the general characterisation of Losev’s views, first of all, we need to point out that they are not articulated sufficiently, which can be explained by the complete absence of freedom of speech in Soviet Russia. It is absolutely clear that Losev had to hide his true thoughts and avoid transparent and direct ways of presenting his system. His metaphysical idealism is obscured by complex, hardly accessible phenomenological analysis, and his religious understanding of the universe, his ‘sophiological’ ideas are expressed as if in passing.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Aza Takho-Godi, “Osnovnye vekhi zhizni i tvorchestva A. F. Loseva,” in *Aleksei Fedorovich Losev*, ed. Aza Takho-Godi and Elena Takho-Godi (Rossiiskaia politicheskaiia entsiklopediia (ROSSPEN), 2009), 13.

<sup>10</sup> Aleksandr Dobrokhoto, “A. F. Losev — filosof kul'tury,” in *Aleksei Fedorovich Losev*, ed. Aza Takho-Godi and Elena Takho-Godi (Rossiiskaia politicheskaiia entsiklopediia (ROSSPEN), 2009), 29–30.

<sup>11</sup> Valentina Postovalova, “Religiozno-filosofskie vozzreniia A. F. Loseva,” in *Aleksei Fedorovich Losev*, ed. Aza Takho-Godi and Elena Takho-Godi (Rossiiskaia politicheskaiia entsiklopediia (ROSSPEN), 2009), 182.

<sup>12</sup> Vasilii Zenkovskii, *Istoriia russkoi filosofii* (Akademicheskii Proekt, Raritet, 2001), 784–789.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 788–789.

As Zenkovskii was a Ukrainian religious philosopher who became an Orthodox priest in emigration, he deemed it important to assert the intellectual superiority of religious philosophy over Marxism and prove that the true development of Russian culture continued in exile, while in the Soviet Union, the development of philosophical thought was extremely difficult, if not impossible.<sup>14</sup>

Since the late 1980s, interpretations of this kind have become canonical, although they are hard to sustain, given that in numerous texts from the 1960s to the 1980s Losev explicitly engaged with Marxist philosophy, as I explore below. Scholars close to Losev's circle, who shared his values and regarded him as an undisputed authority, either ignored the Marxist passages in his works or reinterpreted them based on their understanding of his personality. Personal connections, ranging from brief encounters to close friendships, were often seen as an epistemological advantage, allowing one to receive the 'true' philosophical message hidden from censors and officials. Here, for example, is a valuable testimony from one of my interviewees,<sup>15</sup> a Losev scholar who belonged to the core of Losev's *kruzhok* and explicitly articulated this idea:

Losev's intonation itself means a great deal, of course. Because the text can have completely different meanings, depending on what epithet he chooses and where he puts it, or even where he introduces the word 'bourgeois.' Sometimes one perceives literally where there is play, Losev's irony. That's why his late texts are much harder to read than his early ones. [...]

So, of course, someone who read it in the 1960s, 70s, and 80s would not understand what they were reading at all. And we had a roundtable on Losev's Byzantinism, and one of the speakers said, quite rightly, that essentially [his book] *History of Ancient*

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 690.

<sup>15</sup> On oral history interviews in this study, see below.

*Aesthetics* is an introduction to the teachings of the fathers of the Christian church [...]

That is, he takes a Soviet concept. And he uses it in a completely different context. If instead of 'collective' you put the word *sobornost'*, you get a completely different meaning. [In Losev's writing] there is linguistic play with the choice of concepts. Let's say that the bright future that is promised is 'communism.' If you replace it with 'paradise,' then everything will be quite correct. A completely different thought.<sup>16</sup>

This interpretation of Losev's works is striking for the determination with which it ignores the literal meaning of the text and insists instead on capturing its spirit, based on personal acquaintance and the ability to discern Losev's intonation. However, it is by no means unique; on the contrary, the idea of understanding derived from personal relationships or belonging to a certain group, in one form or another, recurs in many memoirs and interviews that I have analysed.<sup>17</sup> Thus, Losev's image was purified of all Soviet or Marxist traces; his philosophy was presented as a continuation of Russian religious philosophy (which was, in turn, regarded as the culmination of the national intellectual tradition); and his personality as the embodiment of the idea of the 'higher synthesis' of faith and knowledge.

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<sup>16</sup> Anonymous, philologist, member of Losev's *kruzhok*; interview date: 25.01.2024.

<sup>17</sup> Many researchers highlighted the significance of personal communication in late Soviet culture. For example, Alexis Berelowitch points out that orality and informality were among the key aspects of Soviet humanitarian cults as they allowed for a direct contact with the charismatic teacher and created the sense of exceptionality. Alexis Berelowitch, "O kul'te lichnosti i ego posledstviakh," *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie*, no. 76 (2005), <https://m.polit.ru/article/2006/03/10/berelovich/>. Analysing Soviet literary processes of the late 1950s, Emily Lygo shows that poets and writers of Losev's generation became centres of gravity for groups of young aspiring authors who could gain access to Russian literary tradition through personal contact with their teachers. Emily Lygo, *Leningrad Poetry 1953-1975: The Thaw Generation*, Russian Transformations; Volume 2 (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2010), 4–8. Vladimir Shlapentokh notes that personal communication was an especially important value among intellectuals in 1960-70s, in particular because, seminars and conferences served as 'centers for communication and dissemination of ideas not allowed in print.' Vladimir Shlapentokh, *Soviet Intellectuals and Political Power: The Post-Stalin Era*, Course Book, Princeton Legacy Library 1093 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014), 71–73. I also discuss the importance of personal relationship with followers in my recent article on Merab Mamardashvili. Egor Sokolov, "A Special Extraterritoriality of His Position": Merab Mamardashvili's Self-Presentation Strategy and Creation of His Intellectual Cult," accepted for publication in *The Russian Review*.

This strategy of philosophical canonisation turned out to be extremely successful. After Losev's death, it was used by Takho-Godi and other members of his circle to promote this interpretation of his work through a vast network of friendly relations and academic alliances, which was, at least in part, purposefully created.<sup>18</sup> I will discuss this process in detail in the chapter on Losev's *kruzhok*; for now, it is important to note that, thanks to the efforts of Losev's wife and followers, this understanding of his thought has become mainstream in Losev scholarship, shaping the work of even those researchers who were not part of his circle. A good example is Teresa Obolevitch's recent book, which offers an in-depth analysis of Losev's concept of the symbol in the context of religious philosophy and Orthodox theology.<sup>19</sup> This approach, however, leads to the neglect of Soviet intellectual and institutional contexts, which is particularly noticeable in the final chapter, where Losev's aesthetics of the 1960s–1980s are analysed without any reference to Soviet academic debates or to Marxism.<sup>20</sup> However, as I will demonstrate, it is precisely this context that is crucial for understanding not only Losev's 'late' works themselves, but also their reception to this day.

There are a handful of studies that break with this canonical approach. For instance, Rustem Vakhitov argues that the 'Marxist passages' are an essential part of Losev's conception and that removing them from his works would disrupt their logic.<sup>21</sup> He also shows how Losev reworked Marxist concepts (in particular, social formation), incorporating them into his theoretical framework.<sup>22</sup> An insightful analysis of Losev's philosophical technique can be found in the work of Yuri Pushchaev, who analyses the arguments that Losev used in the

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<sup>18</sup> Vladimir Bibikhin, for example, overtly discusses this when describing Losev's funeral in 1988: 'N. and Sh. talked, a pretentious saucebox and a rattlebrain, two symbols of the Moscow University. Aza couldn't stop them: she needs to strengthen her position.' Vladimir Bibikhin, *Aleksei Fedorovich Losev. Sergei Sergeevich Averintsev*, 2nd ed. (Institut filosofii, teologii i istorii sv. Fomy, 2006), 297.

<sup>19</sup> Teresa Obolevitch, *From Onomatodoxy to Aesthetics: Aleksei Losev's Concept of Symbol* (Brill, 2025).

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 305–347.

<sup>21</sup> Rustem Vakhitov, "Losev i marksizm," <http://nevmenandr.net/vaxitov/losevmarx.php>.

<sup>22</sup> Rustem Vakhitov, "Pozdnii Losev i marksizm," *Voprosy filosofii*, no. 1 (2018), [http://vphil.ru/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=1853&Itemid=52](http://vphil.ru/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=1853&Itemid=52).

preface to the *Collected Works* of Plato to justify Platonism in the Soviet philosophical context.<sup>23</sup> Pushchaev draws attention to Losev's almost comically official-sounding characterisation of Plato as an 'ideological' [*ideinyi*] thinker who implemented the principle of 'the most acute criticism and never-ending dialectics.'<sup>24</sup> Pushchaev demonstrates that, through this introductory article, Losev claimed both to have made a 'contribution to the study of Plato sub specie aeternitatis' and to have 'domesticated' Plato by translating him into Soviet philosophical language.<sup>25</sup> In my dissertation, I develop this line of research, offering a comprehensive analysis of the 'late' Losev's philosophy of culture within (and as fundamentally defined by) the late Soviet intellectual context.

In Western academia, Losev's name is not so well-known, perhaps largely because of the intricate mix of different philosophical traditions in his work, including Neo-Platonism, German idealism, Russian religious philosophy, and Marxism. It is not entirely clear who should study him (a philosopher? a theologian? a historian of Soviet culture?), as Losev deliberately avoided any clear disciplinary definition and combined, sometimes in the same text, different styles, such as meticulous philological analysis and provocative essay writing à la Vasilii Rozanov.<sup>26</sup> As a result, Losev's name is discussed in diverse contexts in research on Russian philosophy. While Alyssa DeBlasio places him on a rather traditional list of 'major figures in Russian thought' alongside Nikolai Berdiaev, Petr Chaadaev, Vladimir Solov'ev and

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<sup>23</sup> Yuri Pushchaev, "Sovetskii platonizm (II): platonovskie cherty sovetskoi deistvitel'nosti po A.F. Losevu," *Voprosy filosofii*, no. 4 (2019): 108–117.

<sup>24</sup> Aleksei Losev, "Zhiznennyi i tvorcheskii put' Platona," in *Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 1, by Platon (Mysl', 1990), 58, 62.

<sup>25</sup> Yuri Pushchaev, "Sovetskii platonizm (I): obraz Platona u A.F. Loseva v sovetskom filosofskom i kul'turnom kontekste," *Voprosy filosofii*, no. 1 (2018), [http://vphil.ru/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=1854&Itemid=52](http://vphil.ru/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=1854&Itemid=52).

<sup>26</sup> For example: 'It is impossible to love in electric light; it is only possible to look out for prey. It is impossible to pray in electric light – it is only possible to present a bill. A flickering oil lamp stems from the Orthodox dogma with the same dialectic necessity as the power of the tsar, or communion bread in a church, or offertory. To install electric lights in front of the icons is as ridiculous and is the same kind of nihilism for an Orthodox believer as to fly in aeroplanes or pour kerosene into oil lamps instead of wood oil. It is ridiculous for a professor to dance, for a socialist to fear eternal suffering or love art, for a family man to dine in a restaurant, and for a Jew not to undergo circumcision. It is as ridiculous, and most importantly, nihilistic for an Orthodox, to replace a live quivering flame of a candle or a lamp with a trivial abstraction and cold fornication of electric light.' Aleksei Losev, *Dialektika Mifa* (Moscow: Mysl', 2001), 79.

several others,<sup>27</sup> Mikhail Epstein regards his works as a part of the late Soviet philosophy of culture (or ‘culturology’) together with Mikhail Bakhtin, Vladimir Bibler and Sergei Averintsev.<sup>28</sup> While I am closer to Epstein’s position on this matter, I argue that it is worth breaking more decisively with the disciplinary logic of philosophy by applying the methods of intellectual history and the sociology of knowledge.

There is considerably less scholarship on Sergei Averintsev. I will argue below that this relative lack of attention is, in part, the result of his own intellectual strategy. The few articles about him tend either to focus on specific aspects or themes of his work<sup>29</sup> or to offer general (and usually nostalgic) reflections on his place in late Soviet humanities.<sup>30</sup> Some of the most profound and comprehensive (though still highly partial) articles to date have been written by Olga Sedakova (b. 1949), a poet and scholar who was Averintsev’s student and friend. Particularly noteworthy is her work on Averintsev’s ‘method,’ in which she analyses the characteristics of his intellectual style, showing how research and ethical principles are combined in his writings.<sup>31</sup> An abridged English translation of this work, published in 2006, serves as a good starting point for English-speaking readers.<sup>32</sup> Other relevant works include

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<sup>27</sup> Alyssa DeBlasio, *The End of Russian Philosophy: Tradition and Transition at the Turn of the 21st Century* (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2014), 44.

<sup>28</sup> Mikhail Epstein, *The Phoenix of Philosophy: Russian Thought of the Late Soviet Period (1953-1991)*, Bloomsbury Collections. (New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), 176.

<sup>29</sup> Genadii Kvitkov, “Nekotorye metodologicheskie aspekty rabot S.S. Averintseva,” *Vestnik Tomskogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta*, no. 372 (2013): 110–113; Iuliia Balakshina, “Germenevtika S.S. Averintseva: istoki, printsipy, svoeobrazie,” *The Quarterly Journal of St. Philaret’s Institute*, no. 32 (2019): 110–123; Konstantin Guenko, “Sergei Sergeevich Averintsev i strukturalizm: raskhozhdeniia i skhodstva,” *Zhurnal integrativnykh issledovanii kul’tury* 5, no. 2 (2023): 119–130.

<sup>30</sup> Vitalii Makhlin, “Vozrast rechi. Podstupy k iavleniiu Averintseva,” *Voprosy literatury*, no. 3 (2006), <https://voplit.ru/article/vozrast-rechi-podstupy-k-yavleniyu-averintseva/>; Gasan Gusejnov, “Intelligent ili poët, gumanitarii ili propovednik? S. S. Averintsev v svoem vremeni,” *Dialog. Karnaval. Khronotop*, nos. 1–2 (2010): 70–78.

<sup>31</sup> Olga Sedakova, “Rassuzhdenie o metode,” in *Sergei Sergeevich Averintsev: Vospominaniia. Razmyshleniia. Posviashcheniia* (Sviato-Filaretovskii pravoslavno-khristianskii institut, 2020), 145–180.

<sup>32</sup> Olga Sedakova, “Reflections on Averintsev’s Method,” *Studies in East European Thought* (Dordrecht) 58, no. 2 (2006): 73–84. See also Konstantin Sigov’s article published in the same issue: Konstantin Sigov, “Averintsev’s Archipelago: Towards Understanding the Era of Post-Atheism,” *Studies in East European Thought* (Dordrecht) 58, no. 2 (2006): 85–93.

the examination of the specifics of Averintsev's approach to cultural research,<sup>33</sup> the consideration of Averintsev as a public intellectual who spoke from the standpoint of Christian humanism,<sup>34</sup> as well as a couple of articles that attempt to establish intellectual connections between Losev and Averintsev.<sup>35</sup> Finally, it is worth mentioning Jean-Noël Benoit's book, published in French in 2023, which, to my knowledge, is the only monograph about Averintsev.<sup>36</sup> Unfortunately, this book relies heavily on memoir sources and the opinions of Averintsev's friends and admirers, retelling them for a French-speaking audience.

The usual distinction between primary and secondary literature is not so easy to make in this study. Most of the texts analysed were written by (post)Soviet academics and are characterised by a mixture of genres: on the one hand, memoirs often include analytical passages or reflections on the fate of the Russian intelligentsia;<sup>37</sup> on the other hand, research texts frequently contain recollections and/or interpretations shaped by personal relations. In my research, I encounter a familiar problem: the retrospective construction of biographical narratives and representation of life as 'a coherent and finalised whole.'<sup>38</sup> A striking example of how current events can shape the view of the past is the memoirs of Viacheslav Shestakov (1935–2023), a philosopher who was a member of Losev's circle until

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<sup>33</sup> Aleksandr Dobrokhoto, "Averintsev kak filosof kul'tury," in *Averintsevskie chteniia* (Izdatel'stvo Moskovskogo universiteta, 2008); Gennadii Kvitkov, "Averintsev kak istorik kul'tury" (Dissertatsiia na soiskanie uchenoi stepeni kandidata istoricheskikh nauk, Tomsk State University, 2013).

<sup>34</sup> Vera Pozzi, "Culture as Paideia. Sergei Averintsev and Olga Sedakova: Mapping Out a Path for Contemporary Christian Humanism," *The Quarterly Journal of St. Philaret's Institute*, no. 32 (2019): 88–103.

<sup>35</sup> Justyna Krocak, "Rol' A.F. Loseva v formirovanii vzgliadov S.S. Averintseva na russko-vizantiiskie kul'turnye sviazi," *Solov'evskie issledovaniia*, no. 3 (2017): 78–88; Ivan Ivaniushkin, "A. F. Losev i S. S. Averintsev: peresechenie biografii," in *Prinoshenie: Aze Alibekovne Takho-Godi ot blagodarnykh uchenikov i kolleg k 100-letiiu so dnia rozhdeniia: Fuga temporum.*, ed. Elena Takho-Godi (Aleteiia, 2023), 345–356.

<sup>36</sup> Jean-Noël Benoit, *Serguei Averintsev: une autre dissidence*, Collection "Histoire," (Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2023).

<sup>37</sup> Barbara Walker, "On Reading Soviet Memoirs: A History of the 'Contemporaries' Genre as an Institution of Russian Intelligentsia Culture from the 1790s to the 1970s," *The Russian Review* 59, no. 3 (2000): 329.

<sup>38</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, "The Biographical Illusion (1986)," in *Biography in Theory: Key Texts with Commentaries*, ed. Wilhelm Hemecker and Edward Saunders (De Gruyter, 2017), 210.

his dramatic break with it in the late 1970s: in 2008, he published the first version of his memoirs, *And the Past Is Clearer, Clearer, Clearer* [*A proshloe iasnei, iasnei, iasnei*], and just seven years later, he released the second version, *The Rise and Fall of Intellectualism in Russia* [*Pod"emy i padeniia intellektualizma v Rossii*]. The past, which had been 'clear' in 2008, became 'increasingly foggy' in 2015, when Shestakov lost his position as Head of the Sector at the Russian Institute for Cultural Research (a loss that he interpreted as 'the fall of intellectualism in Russia').<sup>39</sup>

However, there is another, more specific problem that also applies to both figures: many researchers who have written about Losev or Averintsev were personally acquainted with them and were bound to them either by friendship or by disciple-like reverence and gratitude. In some cases, scholarly commentaries on Losev's or Averintsev's texts were explicitly intended to glorify them and to secure their place in the national intellectual canon; in other cases, authors had at least to take into account possible hostile reactions to any criticism of a cult figure, thus carefully choosing their words. This attitude was especially notable in the 1990s and 2000s, when Losev's widow, Aza Takho-Godi, actively promoted his legacy and reacted sharply to criticism, perceiving it as hostility ('I couldn't stand it when someone offended Losev, I hear even the slightest attempt and remember it for life,' as she herself acknowledged<sup>40</sup>). Yet it has persisted to this day, as many of my informants are willing to say more in interviews than they agree to have published — they often fear being misunderstood, appearing harsh or ungrateful. They demonstrate significant caution and sensitivity, hesitating over formulations that, to me, as someone who never belonged to Losev's *kruzhok* and was not an admirer of Averintsev, seem entirely respectful and appropriate.

Thus, in this study, I take into account this absence of a clear boundary between primary and secondary literature by considering: (1) how texts combine elements of memoir and research; (2) how some authors, such as Aza Takho-Godi and Olga Sedakova, seek to

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<sup>39</sup> Viacheslav Shestakov, *Pod"emy i padeniia intellektualizma v Rossii: Moi vospominaniia* (Nestor-Istoriia, 2015), 5.

<sup>40</sup> Aza Takho-Godi, *Losev* (Molodaia gvardiia, 2007), 382.

canonise Losev and Averintsev, respectively; and (3) how other authors, such as Losev's secretaries, the philosopher Vladimir Bibikhin (1938–2004) and the philologist Gasan Gusejnov (b. 1953), inherited and adapted his legacy in different ways. This approach requires expanding the scope of research from the cult figures themselves to their social surroundings and examining the career trajectories and ambitions of those involved in the collective work of writing, editing, publishing, commenting on, and promoting their works. This means that cult figures remain the focus of my research — but primarily as centres of a more cohesive group of disciples and followers (in Losev's case) or of a more amorphous and ephemeral audience of admirers (in Averintsev's case).

## **Theoretical Framework**

Research of this kind — combining the reconstruction of cultural theories with an analysis of the social environment in which (and with the help of which) these theories were created, as well as a study of why their authors were perceived as exceptional figures — is necessarily interdisciplinary. My work is situated within intellectual history in its broadest sense, which, according to Robert Darnton, encompasses four main levels:

the history of ideas (the study of systematic thought, usually in philosophical treatises), intellectual history proper (the study of informal thought, climates of opinion, and literary movements), the social history of ideas (the study of ideologies and idea diffusion), and cultural history (the study of culture in the anthropological sense, including world views and collective mentalités).<sup>41</sup>

The combination of different types of historical analysis is characteristic of Darnton's own research. In his comparative study of censorship, for example, he shows that in the German Democratic Republic, censorship operated at different stages, from the conception of a

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<sup>41</sup> Robert Darnton, "Intellectual and Cultural History," in *The Past Before Us*, ed. Michael Kammen (Cornell University Press, 1980), 337.

book to its circulation, and concerned aesthetics as much as ideology.<sup>42</sup> In this thesis, I likewise work across all these four levels: I analyse philosophical thought; examine its reception among followers and in interdisciplinary debates; study the moral and political implications of philosophical ideas; and consider how the veneration of cult figures is transferred from circles of followers into the national intellectual canon.

Such a combination of different levels of analysis runs up against the problem of the opposition between ‘internal’ understanding (common in the history of ideas and, in particular, in the history of philosophy) and ‘external’ explanation (common in the traditional sociology of knowledge, both in its Marxist and Mertonian<sup>43</sup> versions).<sup>44</sup> In addressing this problem, I draw on Pierre Bourdieu’s sociology of knowledge, which effectively eliminates the internal/external dichotomy, by insisting on a ‘dual reading’ that is political and philosophical at the same time. Methodologically, this type of reading is based on a dual rejection: of ‘reductionism’, a straightforward reduction of the author’s philosophical thought to his class position; and of the assumption that such thought is autonomous and is related only to a certain intellectual tradition and not to its social context.<sup>45</sup> Or, as he formulates it in his article ‘The Literary Field,’ neither Marx nor Hegel.<sup>46</sup> In *The Political Ontology of Martin Heidegger*, Bourdieu analyses the philosopher’s works as arising from ‘a sublimated philosophical version, imposed by the forms of censorship specific to the field of philosophical production, of the political or ethical principles which determined the

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<sup>42</sup> Robert Darnton, *Censors at Work: How States Shaped Literature* (W.W. Norton & Company, 2014), 182–190. On censorship in Russia, see: Polly Jones, “The Censor,” in *The New Cambridge History of Russian Literature*, ed. Simon Franklin et al. (Cambridge University Press, 2024), 333–352.

<sup>43</sup> Robert K. Merton, “The Sociology of Knowledge,” *Isis* 27, no. 3 (1937), 493–503.

<sup>44</sup> The methodological dichotomy between understanding and explanation was discussed by philosophers of the Baden School of Neo-Kantianism. See: Heinrich Rickert, *Science and History: A Critique of Positivist Epistemology* (Van Nostrand, 1962).

<sup>45</sup> Bourdieu, *The Political Ontology of Martin Heidegger*, 3–4.

<sup>46</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, “Le Champ Littéraire,” *Actes de La Recherche En Sciences Sociales* 89, no. 1 (1991): 17.

philosopher's support for Nazism.<sup>47</sup> He demonstrates that Heidegger expressed conservative (anti-Modernist, anti-scientist, anti-democratic, anti-Semitic, etc.) views, but in a sublimated philosophical form, and that his intellectual success is conditioned by his specific social trajectory within the German philosophical field in crisis ('the decline of German mandarins,' as Fritz Ringer puts it<sup>48</sup>).

Bourdieu's approach is particularly well-suited to the examination of intellectual cults. In *The Rules of Art*, Bourdieu identifies the methodological tools needed to analyse the accumulation of symbolic capital, which used to ascribe value to artists' and writers' works, and shows that reputations are created through collective labour<sup>49</sup> within the field, which he defines as 'the site of the struggles for the monopoly of the power to consecrate, in which the value of works of art and belief in that value are continuously generated.'<sup>50</sup> Bourdieu's analysis of the creation of reputations and of the specific forms of symbolic capital, connected to biographically and socially determined positions within the field of cultural production, serves as the methodological premise of this study.

Bourdieu's approach has been applied and expanded by numerous scholars. A 1995 special issue, 'Anatomie du Goût Philosophique,' of *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* seems particularly relevant. In this collection, Charles Soulié links philosophical works' subjects and methods to philosophers' social background, birthplace and parental profession. Such objectification of 'philosophical taste' is fruitful as it allows a critical distance from the dominant forms of philosophers' self-presentation, convincingly demonstrating the impact that 'mundane' circumstances (background, education, career

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<sup>47</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *The Political Ontology of Martin Heidegger* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), 3–4.

<sup>48</sup> Fritz K. Ringer, "The Decline of the German Mandarins: The German Academic Community, 1890–1933," 1969.

<sup>49</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*, Meridian (Stanford Univ. Press, 1996).

<sup>50</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, "The Production of Belief: Contribution to an Economy of Symbolic Goods," *Media, Culture & Society* 2, no. 3 (1980): 265.

ambitions, etc.) have on ‘high-brow’ theory.<sup>51</sup> I also draw on Soulié’s article ‘La pédagogie charismatique de Gilles Deleuze à Vincennes’ in which he analyses Deleuze’s strategies of self-presentation and shows how Deleuze’s admirers associated his philosophical charisma with his personality, attaching ‘great importance to the voice, to the body, as well as to affect, in the relationship that the philosopher has with his public.’<sup>52</sup> This strikingly resembles descriptions of Soviet cult intellectuals, Losev and Averintsev included.

As for specifically Soviet studies, Alexander Bikbov applies Bourdieu’s method, analysing scholarly concepts as social institutions and exploring the language of Soviet sociology through ‘the relation of forces realised in the form of institutions and fractions competing within them.’<sup>53</sup> He examines the biographical trajectories of Soviet sociologists (Tat’iana Zaslavskaia, Vladimir Iadov, Gennadii Osipov, and others), linking their career paths to the ways in which they set and achieved intellectual goals. He further develops this analysis in a more recent article in which he describes the formation of Soviet sociology as a result of a compromise or ‘double regulation’, that is ‘institutional [regulation] with the party guaranteeing a bureaucratic career to sociologists and demanding loyalty from them’ and ‘an intellectual one related to the influence of international organisations and the efforts to adapt global models to the national language.’<sup>54</sup> Such an analysis of Soviet sociology not only demonstrates that intellectual reputations depended on the social organisation of intellectual life but also showcases how Bourdieu’s method can be applied to the Soviet context. While Soviet sociology was remarkably lacking in cult figures,<sup>55</sup> Bikbov’s research

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<sup>51</sup> Charles Soulié, “Anatomie du goût philosophique,” *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* 109, no. 1 (1995): 3–28.

<sup>52</sup> Charles Soulié, “La pédagogie charismatique de Gilles Deleuze à Vincennes,” *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* 216–217, no. 1–2 (2017): 52.

<sup>53</sup> Alexander Bikbov, *Grammatika poriadka. Istoricheskaiia sotsiologiia poniatii, kotorye meniaiut nashu real’nost’* (Izdatel’skii dom Vysshei shkoly ekonomiki, 2014), 310.

<sup>54</sup> Alexander Bikbov, “« Une péripétie du gouvernement »: la sociologie soviétique entre incitation et répression,” *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* 243–244, no. 3–4 (2022): 49.

<sup>55</sup> Alexander Bikbov sees the reason for this in the ‘top-down’ establishment of the discipline. Firstly, unlike philosophy or philology, sociology was ‘too Soviet’ a discipline as it did not have any pre-revolutionary intellectual legacy. Secondly, sociological seminars and *kruzhki* were persecuted in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Bikbov argues that in case of sociology, party sanctions were especially effective as they were not

provides a valuable example of how complex intellectual activity can be analysed within the framework of Soviet academic institutions. In this thesis, my analysis of the concept of 'culture' draws to a large extent on his analysis of the use of concepts (such as 'middle class' and 'progress') in academic and political struggles.

## **Late Soviet Intellectual Life**

Soviet intellectual life in the 1960s to 1980s has attracted increasing scholarly attention. This study draws primarily on studies of the late Soviet intelligentsia that explore their diverse tactics of exploiting authoritative discourse, as well as the complex social and intellectual practices developed in 'niches' or 'grey zones' between official and unofficial institutions. Alexei Yurchak famously argued that, during the late Soviet period, the forms of ideological language became increasingly rigid and formulaic, and the performative use of official discourse became dominant.<sup>56</sup> However, many other scholars draw attention to the creative use of and experiments with ideological language in this period. For example, Caroline Humphrey, analysing the memoirs of a Party official, Georgii Lukich Smirnov, challenges Yurchak's conclusions, demonstrating that ideological discourse remained a site of conflict and creativity.<sup>57</sup> Nancy Condee discovers ideological creativity even in the inner sanctum of party orthodoxy. She analyses Khrushchev's speeches to show that his anti-Modernism was not an attempt to revert to the Stalinist 'grand style' but rather a shift towards post-Modernism. In her view, Khrushchev expressed 'a public and official love of the improvisational, the extemporaneous, the profane, and the essayistic, a mixing of cultural

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repressions of freethinking intellectuals but rather a form of coercing them into complying with the dominant model of a Soviet academic bureaucrat. Bikbov, *Grammatika poriadka*, 376–378.

<sup>56</sup> Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton University Press, 2005), 13–14. For more details, see the Russian translation: Alexei Yurchak, *Eto bylo navsegda, poka ne konchilos'*. *Poslednee sovetskoe pokolenie* (Moscow: Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie, 2014), 52–54.

<sup>57</sup> Caroline Humphrey, "The 'Creative Bureaucrat': Conflicts in the Production of Soviet Communist Party Discourse," *Inner Asia* 10, no. 1 (January 1, 2008): 12–14.

styles and levels that defy established hierarchies and cultural codes.’<sup>58</sup> Perhaps presenting Khrushchev as a predecessor of Dmitrii Prigov and Il’ia Kabakov is an exaggeration; however, her argument allows us to reconsider the ‘wooden’ official language as more generative and amenable to creative adaptation than previously thought.<sup>59</sup> In this thesis, I examine creative ways of engaging with the authoritative discourse, which for Soviet academics took the form of official Marxism. Even in the case of Averintsev, the demonstrative ignoring of Marxism must still be taken into account as a deliberate violation of readers’ expectations (a ‘minus device’, in Iurii Lotman’s terms).

Other studies identify a range of complex ways that the late Soviet intelligentsia interacted with official institutions and ideological discourse. For example, in his work on Soviet cybernetics, Slava Gerovitch examines how collaboration between scientists and government or party organisations prompted them to master Soviet bureaucratic language. Contrary to Yurchak, Gerovitch highlights the flexibility of this language:

Newspeak did not simply express some pre-established orthodoxy; quite the opposite, the skilful use of newspeak allowed one to manipulate ideology and, to some extent, to define what was permitted in the Soviet context. A manifestly dogmatic and at the same time strikingly flexible language, newspeak did not embody the truth; it provided mechanisms for negotiating the truth.<sup>60</sup>

In particular, he describes a discursive strategy, widespread in Soviet academia, of using ideological means to secure a certain intellectual freedom. In order to be transferred to the Soviet context, Western scientific theories had to be divided into two parts: the ‘purely scientific,’ value-neutral core and the ideological (‘idealistic’) shell, which could be

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<sup>58</sup> Nancy Condee, “Cultural Codes of the Thaw,” in *Nikita Khrushchev*, ed. William Taubman, Sergei Khrushchev, and Abbott Gleason (Yale University Press, 2000), 171.

<sup>59</sup> Kevin Platt’s analysis of Khrushchev’s ‘secret speech’ also demonstrates the complexity of his rhetorical strategy. Kevin M. F. Platt, “Secret Speech: Wounding, Disavowal, and Social Belonging in the USSR,” *Critical Inquiry* (Chicago) 42, no. 3 (2016): 662–663.

<sup>60</sup> Slava Gerovitch, *From Newspeak to Cyberspeak: A History of Soviet Cybernetics* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2002), 13–14.

discarded.<sup>61</sup> These strategies, developed in the scientific discussions of the 1930s and 1940s, were reinvented in the 1950s and 1960s and were used in new post-Stalinist conditions to legitimise research subjects and even disciplines.<sup>62</sup> Similar tactics were used by my protagonists, who, under the guise of ‘aesthetics,’ a discipline that aroused less ideological suspicion, practised philosophy of culture and even theology.

The creative development and use of ideological formulae turned them into a means of struggle between political or disciplinary factions. Polly Jones describes ‘the struggle over the Thaw’ between liberals and conservatives, demonstrating that both sides used similar moral and ideological arguments and attempted to win over the party authorities. She highlights that ‘there was more similarity than difference in the ways that both sides negotiated the mechanisms and methods of Soviet literary culture.’<sup>63</sup> Jones’ analysis proves that although these debates did not bring the definitive victory to either side, they still played a significant role in developing new language and ideas, such as different definitions of literature and cultural standards. In this study, I examine a similar case: a scholarly discussion between philosophers and historians over Losev’s *Aesthetics of the Renaissance*, in which both sides use ideological formulae and official Marxism in their struggle to define disciplinary boundaries and legitimate research methods.

In the 1970s and 1980s, the Soviet intelligentsia, including my protagonists, continued to develop complex tactics of compromise or evasion of ideological control. Mark Sandle points to the importance of intellectual niches<sup>64</sup> which existed within academic institutions,

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>62</sup> Alexander Bikbov describes the emergence of the conceptual framework of Soviet sociology in the 1960s as a result of a compromise between Marxism and Talcott Parsons’s structural functionalism, which made it possible to present the ‘technical’ skills necessary to conduct sociological research as compliant with the Marxist theory. Bikbov, *Grammatika poriadka*, 389.

<sup>63</sup> Polly Jones, “The Personal and the Political: Opposition to the Thaw and the Politics of Literary Identity in the 1950s and 1960s,” in *The Thaw: Soviet Society and Culture during the 1950s and 1960s*, ed. Denis Kozlov and Eleonory Gilburd (University of Toronto Press, 2013), 254–255.

<sup>64</sup> See on niches: Lev Losev, *On the Beneficence of Censorship: Aesopian Language in Modern Russian Literature* (O. Sagner in Kommission, 1984); Zubok, *Zhivago’s Children*, 323–330; Polly Jones, *Revolution Rekindled. The Writers and Readers of Late Soviet Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 66–99; Ilya Kukulin, “‘Grey Zones’ Between Official and Unofficial Cultures: Institutional Diversity, Klub-81, and

or even within certain sectors of the apparatus of the Central Committee, often under a powerful patron.<sup>65</sup> In such circumstances, Soviet intellectuals had to choose less dangerous or politicised research subjects, master Aesopian language<sup>66</sup> or try to express unorthodox ideas using orthodox vocabulary (as I show below, Aleksei Losev used all these tactics). Sandle maintains that it is important to study Soviet experts and scholars, ‘who fell between the two stools of unprincipled conformity on the one hand, and dissent on the other,’ who developed, albeit in a limited compromised form, original ideas and loosened Marxist-Leninist dogmatism.<sup>67</sup>

Soviet writers resorted to similar tactics and compromises. In *Revolution Rekindled*, Polly Jones analyses a book series in which some of the most popular unorthodox authors, including those who took part in or sympathised with the dissident movement, wrote biographies of revolutionaries for arguably the most orthodox publisher, *Politizdat*. This work helps to challenge the opposition between the clichéd official literature and the creative underground one and demonstrates that in some cases, Soviet publications ‘could, if inconsistently, contribute to the “varied thinking” that now appears to be one of the defining features of late Soviet society.’<sup>68</sup> More importantly, Jones offers a detailed analysis of the negotiations and compromises between the authors and editors who collaborated with them and censored them at the same time. Such complex interactions made possible the existence of the book series as a relatively safe space for those representatives of the literary intelligentsia who fit neither into the official nor into the dissident (*samizdat* and *tamizdat*)

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(Many) Others,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Soviet Underground Culture*, ed. Mark Lipovetsky et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).

<sup>65</sup> Mark Sandle, “A Triumph of Ideological Hairdressing? Intellectual Life in the Brezhnev Era Reconsidered,” in *Brezhnev Reconsidered*, ed. Mark Sandle and Edwin Bacon (Palgrave Macmillan Limited, 2002), 140–148.

<sup>66</sup> See the description of the Soviet Aesopian language in: Lev Klein, *Fenomen sovetskoi arkheologii* («Farn», 1993), 81–89.

<sup>67</sup> Sandle, “A Triumph of Ideological Hairdressing?,” 158.

<sup>68</sup> Polly Jones, *Revolution Rekindled. The Writers and Readers of Late Soviet Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 6.

literature.<sup>69</sup> In this thesis, I discuss a similar case: Averintsev's friendly collaboration with Iurii Popov, the editor of the *Philosophical Encyclopaedia*, which allowed him to publish a series of entries on religious subjects and brought him recognition.

Even underground writers, as Josephine von Zitzewitz shows, maintained many connections with official literature. Firstly, almost all of them started their career at an early age, attending literary clubs created by the state to foster young talents.<sup>70</sup> Secondly, in their literary, critical and publishing activities, they followed the guidelines in operation for censored Soviet literature so that samizdat publications were often significantly based on the model of Soviet 'thick' journals<sup>71</sup>. Thirdly, they even founded a paradoxical official organisation of unofficial writers (Klub-81).

In this study, I draw on the approach developed in this scholarship on late Soviet intellectual life, especially in the works of Jones and von Zitzewitz, which moves away from binary oppositions (rigid ideology vs heroic dissent) and instead focuses on the complex entanglement of conformity and autonomy. I apply this approach to the analysis of philosophical texts and academic debates, highlighting aspects that have previously received little scholarly attention. At the same time, the analysis of intellectuals' engagement with official discourse and institutions must be complemented by an examination of unofficial communities, which often served as spaces of intellectual creativity and of the formation of intelligentsia subjectivity.

### ***Kruzhki***

One of the key forms of social organisation of the late Soviet intelligentsia was circles, or *kruzhki*, relatively small unofficial or semi-official groups in which friendships and patron–

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 89–99.

<sup>70</sup> Josephine Zitzewitz von, "Reader Questionnaires in Samizdat Journals. Who Owns Aleksandr Blok?," in *Dropping out of Socialism: The Creation of Alternative Spheres in the Soviet Bloc*, ed. Juliane Fürst and Josie McLellan (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2016), 108.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 110.

client relations were formed, and intellectual style, cultural preferences, moral or political beliefs were shaped. *Kruzhki* have a long history in Russian culture: they began to appear in earnest in Russia in the 1830s and, in the absence of a public sphere, became spaces for discussing literature, philosophy, and politics. Michael Gordin highlights the following features of *kruzhki* as a specific social form: 1) a specific area of discussion (literature, philosophy, etc.); 2) a small size; 3) clearly defined membership; 4) co-optation under the patronage of one of the *kruzhok* members.<sup>72</sup> These characteristics point to a strong connection between the social organisation of science and the system of ethical and political values. Michael Gordin uses the example of the establishment of the Russian Chemical Society (1868), founded based on a *kruzhok* of Russian chemists, which defined not only the Society members' line of research but also their social composition and political (in this case, nationalistic) views.<sup>73</sup>

*Kruzhki* remained the key social institution of Russian intellectual life through both the Imperial and Soviet periods. Barbara Walker argues that after the Revolution, their importance even increased, as in the hard times of the Civil War, intellectuals

grasped frantically at any means of gaining access to the resources that they needed to survive, and the means with which they were most familiar — indeed, almost the only means they had — were the tools of *kruzhok* culture: networking and clientelism.<sup>74</sup>

Walker describes the formation of various literary circles patronised by Maksimilian Voloshin, Valerii Briusov and Maksim Gor'kii, emphasising the link between economic patronage and intellectual mentorship, and showing how grateful members of those *kruzhki*

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<sup>72</sup> Michael D. Gordin “«Le Premier Cercle»: le “Kruzhok” de Heidelberg et la nationalisation de la chimie russe / “Running in Circles”: The Heidelberg Kruzhok and the Nationalization of Russian Chemistry,” *Sociologie du Travail*, Vol. 48, No. 3 (Juillet-Septembre 2006): 289.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 299.

<sup>74</sup> Barbara Walker “Kruzhok Culture: The Meaning of Patronage in the Early Soviet Literary World,” *Contemporary European History*, 11, 1 (2002): 115.

laid the foundation for the cults of their benefactors.<sup>75</sup> Her approach allows us to understand how patronage, the social contract between intellectuals and the Soviet state, was formed.<sup>76</sup> It also helps to explain the success of Stalinist cultural politics, which was based on similar principles, except that it allowed for only one cult leader.<sup>77</sup>

The analysis of *kruzhki* and similar informal associations and friend groups [*kompanii*] helps to overcome the methodological problem of public–private dichotomy in Soviet studies. Juliane Fürst examines *kompanii* of Soviet youth in the 1950s and 1960s whose members gathered to read poetry and exchange books, go camping and sing with guitars, drink and entertain. She demonstrates that, while staying within private associations and/or spaces, Soviet young people still found opportunities to realise social [*obshchestvennye*] functions through them.<sup>78</sup> On numerous occasions, these groups emerged out of official institutions, yet were subsequently privatised and transformed to develop alternative mechanisms of identification, growing into a functional substitute for the public sphere.<sup>79</sup>

Although Soviet academic, literary and political *kruzhki*<sup>80</sup> differed significantly from each other, they always had complex structures with a ‘mixture of the public and private.’<sup>81</sup> Intellectual *kruzhki* often appeared on the fringes of or on the basis of official academic

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 113–120.

<sup>76</sup> Sheila Fitzpatrick was among the first to shift the focus of research from the conflict between the state and scientists to their collaboration and compromises. Moving from the peak of confrontation (‘Philosophers’ Ships’) to the period of normalisation and the conclusion of a new academic contract allowed her to uncover the social meaning of the struggle for academic autonomy: old professors aspired to improve their economic conditions and to maintain their group status, as well as to retain control over the reproduction of the professional corps. Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Cultural Front: Power and Culture in Revolutionary Russia* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1992), 37–64.

<sup>77</sup> “There were to be no personality cults other than his own, unless the cult figure was his client (Gorky, for example) or dead (like Aleksandr Pushkin).” Ibid., 123.

<sup>78</sup> Juliane Fürst, “Friends in Private, Friends in Public: The Phenomenon of the *Kompaniia* Among Soviet Youth in the 1950s and 1960s,” in *Borders of Socialism: Private Spheres of Soviet Russia*, ed. Lewis Siegelbaum (New York, 2006), 230–231.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 233–235.

<sup>80</sup> See on *kruzhki*: Barbara Walker, “Pollution and Purification in the Moscow Human Rights Networks of the 1960s and 1970s,” *Slavic Review* 68, No. 2 (2009).

<sup>81</sup> Juliane Fürst, “Friends in Private, Friends in Public,” 232.

institutions.<sup>82</sup> In her study of the everyday life of Soviet scientists in Chernogolovka, Maria Rogacheva analyses how the members of the cinema club 'Kaleidoscope' used institutional support and personal connections to watch ideologically dubious Western films or uncensored Soviet ones, hiding behind the ostensible goal to raise the cultural level of the academic youth.<sup>83</sup> Daniel Alexandrov argues that *kruzhki* as a form of self-organisation allowed Soviet scientists to tackle both intellectual and social challenges:

*Kruzhki* attended by young people usually became for them a formative social setting in which they acquired and reaffirmed their identity as well as social bonds with future colleagues. Most of them remained friends for life and formed a tight clique [...] helping each other in power brokerage. A *kruzhok*-type group often became a basis for a research school with a senior intellectual leader designated by members as the school founder.<sup>84</sup>

Using the example of Sergei Chetverikov's *kruzhok* of geneticists and Ehrenfest-Ioffe's *kruzhok* of physics, Alexandrov demonstrates that *kruzhki* were both friend groups that supported academic promotion of their members, and also discursive communities which develop certain styles of thought and new approaches to solving scientific problems.<sup>85</sup>

*Kruzhki* scholarship, especially Walker's work, provides a valuable point of comparison, allowing me to identify in my informants' recollections of meetings at Losev's home cultural patterns reproduced across many decades of Russian and Soviet history: networking and patron-client, or in this case rather teacher-student, relations that included economic support and intellectual guidance (here, I discuss Losev's *kruzhok*, since Averintsev

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<sup>82</sup> Paul R. Josephson, *New Atlantis Revisited: Akademgorodok, the Siberian City of Science* (Princeton University Press, 1997).

<sup>83</sup> Maria Rogacheva, *The Private World of Soviet Scientists from Stalin to Gorbachev* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 101–106.

<sup>84</sup> Daniel Alexandrov, "The Politics of Scientific «Kruzhok»: Study Circles in Russian Science and Their Transformation in the 1920s" in *Na perelome: Sovetskaia biologiiia v 20–30-kh godakh*, ed. E.I. Kolchinskii (St. Petersburg, Sankt-Peterburgskii Filial Instituta Istorii Estestvoznaniia i Tekhniki RAN, 1997), 257.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 258–265.

deliberately did not assemble one around himself). However, in my study of the Losev circle, I faced a methodological problem: it was not entirely clear how, in the absence of formal membership, to determine who its members were; moreover, it became less and less obvious over the course of my research that the group of people gathered around Losev could be defined as a *kruzhok*. The key point is that this group included very diverse people: from professors occupying important positions in the Soviet academy to young graduate students who worked as Losev's secretaries, as well as non-academic admirers who regarded him more as a spiritual leader. Some of them rarely interacted with each other and often held opposite opinions on Losev. For example, Gasan Gusejnov, one of Losev's secretaries in the 1970s–1980s, told me:

The thing is that [the meetings at Losev's] were very different. Because different people came at different times. And you were assigned a certain slot, for example, of colleagues from the department, and that was one group. Another group were important people from the Institute of Philosophy of the Academy of Sciences. Or some others... The deputy director of the Institute of World Literature, Piotr Vasilievich Palievskii, a *pochvennik* and nationalist, was Losev's great admirer. I never shared a slot with him. [...]

— *Did you make any friends in this circle, among people who were around Losev?*

I didn't quite make them. They were [there]. We had a friendly circle, but friendly relations didn't depend on whether one was connected to Losev or not.<sup>86</sup>

Philologist Vladimir Zhdanov, Losev's assistant in the 1970s–1980s, even told me that no *kruzhok* had ever existed:

I have to disappoint you right away, as there was no *kruzhok*. There were three generations of Losevites [*losevtsy*]. The first was his secretaries, who worked and

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<sup>86</sup> Gasan Gusejnov, philologist, Losev's secretary and Averintsev's colleague; interview date: 17.12.2023.

read Latin and Greek texts. I worked a little bit with French ones; I worked with a secretary for two months, but then I quit. [...] These were the Losevites, the young ones, the first generation, secretaries, but also friends. The secretary didn't just come [to work], he also came to visit, and came to the dacha, and chatted, and helped with something. The second generation... probably Averintsev, probably Bibikhin, who were older [than the first generation]. Well, the third generation is already posthumous. Completely different people came [on the scene].<sup>87</sup>

Clearly, when an interviewee whom you regard as a member of a *kruzhok* states that there was no *kruzhok* whatsoever, this presents a serious challenge. Nonetheless, as I will now explain, it is still possible to use the term 'Losev's *kruzhok*.' First, it must be noted that Michael Gordin's definition does not fit this case — it appears better suited to official structures, such as a university society with a written charter and formally defined membership. Unofficial *kruzhki*, without fixed membership or a defined procedure for admission, are closer to friend groups,<sup>88</sup> writers' communities<sup>89</sup> or semi-formal academic movements.<sup>90</sup> In all these communities, the public and the private are intricately entwined, and the relationships between their members are often a mixture of intellectual influence, professional relations, friendships, romances, and moral or quasi-religious discipleship. This complexity of relations between members means that, in many cases, it is almost impossible to draw a clear boundary around the *kruzhok* or to determine unambiguously who was a member and on what grounds. I suggest that, under these conditions, we should consider two complementary criteria: subjective and functional.

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<sup>87</sup> Vladimir Zhdanov, slavist, Losev's assistant, interview date: 08.03.2024.

<sup>88</sup> Juliane Fürst, "Friends in Private, Friends in Public: The Phenomenon of the *Kompaniia* Among Soviet Youth in the 1950s and 1960s," in *Borders of Socialism: Private Spheres of Soviet Russia*, ed. Lewis Siegelbaum (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

<sup>89</sup> Polly Jones, "The Thaw's Provincial Margins: Place, Community and Canon in Pages from Tarusa," *Slavic Review* 80, no. 4 (Winter 2021).

<sup>90</sup> Maxim O. Kupovykh, "The Soviet Empire of Signs: A Social and Intellectual History of the Tartu School of Semiotics" (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2005), 72–92.

Firstly, when trying to establish who belonged to a *kruzhok*, one needs to consider the subjective experience of belonging, trust, friendship, collective intellectual work, and discipleship (oral history interviews are invaluable as a way of accessing this experience). *Kruzhki* are loci for the dissemination of moral and intellectual standards in accordance with the cultural traditions of the Russian intelligentsia. Vladislav Zubok describes how Boris Pasternak's funeral prompted this kind of transmission of the liberal intelligentsia's ethos:

The death of the poet, who had belonged to the spiritual milieu of the old intelligentsia, was the moment at which another spiritual and civic community emerged in the popular mind. The young people who identified with that community had a vastly different social background and life experience than Pasternak had [...] And they viewed themselves as the descendants of the great cultural and moral tradition that Pasternak, his protagonist Iurii Zhivago, and his milieu embodied. Thus, they were Zhivago's children, in a spiritual sense.<sup>91</sup>

The inheritance of tradition is even more tangible when it occurs not in an imagined but in a real community of people, in the form of direct discipleship. As I show below, Losev's former disciples and followers acknowledge his transformative influence to this day, engaging in distinct forms of self-reflection in which intellectual work takes on moral significance. This experience of shaping one's subjectivity and developing intellectual techniques, religious beliefs, or moral principles through a personal connection with the Teacher and through belonging to a community is a core characteristic of the groups of people analysed here: this is the first reason to term it a *kruzhok*.

Secondly, we need to analyse how the group functions. To decide whether a particular group of people can be called a *kruzhok*, it is important to consider whether it acts as a collective, and for a purpose beyond social gatherings. In my view, this distinguishes a *kruzhok* from a wider *kompaniia*: members of a *kruzhok* do not simply spend time together for pleasure; they

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<sup>91</sup> Vladislav Zubok, *Zhivago's Children: The Last Russian Intelligentsia* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London: Harvard University Press, 2009), 20–21.

engage in collective intellectual and symbolic work. Together they write articles for collections, edit and prepare texts for publication, organise conferences, and create memorial institutions. In the case of Losev's *kruzhok*, the collective activities took the following forms:

1. Intellectual production. Losev's secretaries facilitated his work and, after his death, took part in the editing and publication of his numerous writings.
2. Symbolic production. Losev's followers created and maintained his cult, ensured the impeccability of his philosophical reputation, and established their interpretations of Losev's life and works as canonical in the Russian philosophical field.
3. Production of social relations. Members of the group (or its factions) had professional, friendly, and apprentice relationships and formed networks of mutual support.
4. Production of subjectivity. Members of the group adopted a certain ethos and style of intellectual work, as well as religious and political views (even if different factions did so in their own ways).

To put it simply, the people I studied participated in collective intellectual, symbolic, and social production, and for many of them, this participation was a formative experience; this is the second reason why I consider it legitimate to call this group a *kruzhok*.

Based on oral history interviews and memoirs, I reconstruct the structure and describe the functioning of the Losev *kruzhok*. This analysis aims to understand how intellectual collaboration was organised within the *kruzhok*, how social networks were formed on its basis, and how its members carried out the symbolic work of creating and promoting an intellectual cult. As I will show further, it was the *kruzhok* that ensured the longevity of Losev's cult, whereas the absence of a *kruzhok* foundation led to the gradual decline of Averintsev's cult.

## Cults

In his novella *Father Sergius*, Leo Tolstoy tells the story of Stepan Kasatskii, a nobleman and officer of the Guards, who learns that his young fiancée was the mistress of the Emperor and withdraws to a monastery. Taking monastic vows under the name Sergius, he spends years struggling with pride and lust — first in the monastery, and later at the hermitage. His fame spreads, and within a few years, monks settle near his hermitage, a church and a guesthouse are built, and more and more visitors arrive, while he begins to perform miraculous healings. Tolstoy finds remarkably precise words to describe the processes of routinisation of charisma and institutionalisation of a cult.<sup>92</sup> Around Father Sergius emerges a circle of followers who venerate him as a saint and, at the same time, use him to create an organised worship, generating a flow of symbolic and financial capital. Essentially, Tolstoy depicts the same social process that Victor Turner explores in his famous work *The Ritual Process*, analysing the transformation of the *communitas* of Francis of Assisi into the Franciscan order of the Catholic Church.<sup>93</sup>

In this thesis, I study intellectual cults, yet my material provides some grounds for their comparison with religious ones. Firstly, the protagonists of my study were not only devout Christians, but also, in a sense, religious figures: both were engaged in religious philosophy and theology, Losev was revered by his followers as a ‘scholarly monk in the world’ who upheld the Orthodox ascetic tradition, whilst Averintsev, in the 1990s, formally became a reader (the lowest rank in the Orthodox clergy) and preached in church. Secondly, and more importantly, some of their admirers regarded them almost as sacred figures — and although such forms of veneration might have been seen by other students and followers as excessive or eccentric (especially in Averintsev’s case), they are highly revealing, as they demonstrate how similar the symbolic models of religious and intellectual cults are. As I show below, secular forms of veneration of cult figures followed the same symbolic model as (quasi-

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<sup>92</sup> Leo Tolstoy, *Father Sergius*, trans. Maude Louise and Maude Aylmer (CACTUS, 2016), 30.

<sup>93</sup> Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Routledge, 2017), 141–153.

)religious ones: ‘true’ culture functioned as an analogue of the sacred realm, and those who studied it as a kind of priests, helping others to access to it.

A crucial aspect of the cult-building process, characteristic of both religious and intellectual cults, is the interplay between its organisational and symbolic components: on the one hand, the creation of hierarchical structures, statutes, and formalised rituals; on the other hand, the selection of certain episodes from the charismatic leader’s life as especially significant, editing or omission of others, the consolidation of particular interpretations of his writings as canonical, and the establishment of connections between the cult figure and a specific religious or intellectual tradition. As Tolstoy shows with relentless accuracy, the driving force of this process is instrumentalisation — that is, the use of the cult figure by his followers to pursue their own ends. This does not mean, of course, that they are guided solely by cynical calculations of personal gain; on the contrary, as we will see in the example of Aza Takho-Godi, cult-building activity could be experienced by its participants as dedicated service or even self-sacrifice. Yet the followers’ efforts to promote the cult figure, defend his authority, and secure its recognition by agents and institutions of consecration (such as churches, academies, museums, or salons),<sup>94</sup> as well as through organisational work in consolidating supporters, all contribute to the elevation of their own status.<sup>95</sup>

Intellectual cults, which I focus on in this study, have not received much scholarly attention so far.<sup>96</sup> One of the first scholars to draw attention to the symbolic structure of late and post-Soviet intellectual cults was Alexis Berelowitch. In his 2005 article *On the Cult of Personality and Its Consequences* [*O kul'te lichnosti i ego posledstviakh*], written shortly after the death

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<sup>94</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, “The Market of Symbolic Goods,” *Poetics* 14, no. 1 (1985): 13–24.

<sup>95</sup> Just as cultural prizes and awards elevate the prestige not only of the writers or artists who receive them, but also of a wide range of ‘players,’ such as scholars, critics, sponsors, and officials. See: James F. English, *The Economy of Prestige: Prizes, Awards, and the Circulation of Cultural Value* (Harvard University Press, 2005), 51.

<sup>96</sup> Unlike, for example, intellectual cults of French philosophers. See: Pierre Bourdieu, “Sartre,” *London Review of Books* 2, no. 22 (1980); Louis Pinto, *La Vocation et le Métier de Philosophe. Pour une sociologie de la philosophie dans la France contemporaine* (Seuil, 2007); Charles Soulié, “La pédagogie charismatique de Gilles Deleuze à Vincennes,” *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* 216–217, nos. 1–2 (2017): 42–63; David Halperin, *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography* (Oxford University Press, 2023).

of Sergei Averintsev and clearly inspired by the volume of obituaries and memoirs *In Memoriam*,<sup>97</sup> Berelowitch identifies recurring rhetorical formulas used to speak ‘in a different form, with a different tone and in a different language’ about such diverse figures as Mikhail Bakhtin, Sergei Averintsev, Iurii Lotman, Lev Gumilev, and Merab Mamardashvili.<sup>98</sup> In their often highly emotional testimonies, colleagues, students, and followers repeatedly emphasised the significance of personal contact with the charismatic intellectual and proclaimed his belonging to pre-revolutionary culture. As I demonstrate in my study, this is true both for Losev and Averintsev (however paradoxical it may appear for someone born in 1937).

Usually, intellectual cults have not been the primary focus of research, and only some of their aspects are discussed within the history of ideas or even political history.<sup>99</sup> In this dissertation, I analyse the entire process of cult-building, including: (1) the self-presentation of a charismatic intellectual; (2) the relationships and interactions between the intellectual and his students, followers, and admirers; (3) the construction of a canonical biographical narrative and interpretations of his intellectual work; (4) the promotion of the cult figure veneration beyond the initial circle of admirers, along with the memorialisation and entrenchment of this figure in the national intellectual canon; (5) the strategies of using the canonised image by colleagues and followers to their own ends (depending on their positions within the intellectual field). I consider it essential to examine both the intellectual strategies of cult figures — the distinctive style and content of theoretical work that sets

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<sup>97</sup> Renata Galtseva, ed., *In memoriam: Sergei Averintsev* (INION RAN, 2004).

<sup>98</sup> Berelowitch, “O kul'te lichnosti i ego posledstviakh.”

<sup>99</sup> After the Russian intervention in Ukraine in 2014, scholars turned to the intellectual roots of right-wing rhetoric used by Russian officials and media to legitimise both external aggression and internal repression — and, among other things, examined the figure of Evgenii Golovin (1938–2010), a writer, translator, occultist, and radical right-wing thinker. Researchers have studied his role as a charismatic leader of Moscow’s ‘mystical underground,’ as well as his influence on conservative and fascist ideologists, such as Geidar Dzhemal’ or Aleksandr Dugin. See: Maria Engström, “Late-Soviet Occulture: Evgeny Golovin and the Yuzhinsky Circle,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Soviet Underground Culture*, ed. Mark Lipovetsky et al. (Oxford University Press, 2021), 872–876; Fabrizio Fenghi, *It Will Be Fun and Terrifying: Nationalism and Protest in Post-Soviet Russia* (The University of Wisconsin Press, 2020), 170–172; Marlene Laruelle, “The Iuzhinskii Circle: Far-Right Metaphysics in the Soviet Underground and Its Legacy Today,” *The Russian Review* 74, no. 4 (2015): 568–573.

them apart from their academic milieu — and the often-overlooked work of their colleagues, students, and followers, from explicit or implicit co-authorship to practices of commemoration and memorialisation. Their efforts were often essential for shaping the intellectual reputation of the cult figure. For example, Iurii Popov's editing made possible the publication of Averintsev's religious entries in the *Philosophical Encyclopaedia*, while Aza Taho-Godi's organisational and commentary work played a crucial role in shaping the way Aleksei Losev's figure was perceived.

An important point of reference for this study is research on the philologist and historian Iurii Lotman, one of the leaders of the liberal intelligentsia. Scholars have emphasised his role as the head of the Tartu school of semiotics, which was perceived by its members not merely as a research current but as a community that sought to intellectually distance itself from Soviet academic order while formally remaining within it.<sup>100</sup> Lotman's cult was different from those of Losev and Averintsev in that it received significant international recognition. Lotman's semiotics attracted the attention of Western public intellectuals, such as Roman Jakobson, Julia Kristeva and Umberto Eco, which, coupled with his later support for the Estonian democratic movement, turned him by the end of his life into 'a kind of Estonian cultural hero and a national icon.'<sup>101</sup> However, within the 'domestic' intellectual sphere, this difference was not so significant, since, as in the case of Losev and Averintsev, Lotman's work, with its moral assumptions and political allusions, was regarded by certain communities within the Russian intelligentsia as an expression of its values and ideals.<sup>102</sup>

The late Soviet period saw a flourishing of intellectual cults. I suggest that this was related to numerous attempts to break with the Soviet symbolic order, to create new cultural forms or

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<sup>100</sup> Maxim Waldstein, *The Soviet Empire of Signs: A History of the Tartu School of Semiotics* (VDM Verlag Dr. Mueller e.K., 2008), 64–70; Boris Gasparov, "Tartuskaia shkola 1960-kh godov kak semioticheskii fenomen," in *Iu. M. Lotman i tartusko-moskovskaia semioticheskaja shkola* (Gnozis, 1994), 281–289.

<sup>101</sup> Maxim Waldstein, "Russifying Estonia? Iurii Lotman and the Politics of Language and Culture in Soviet Estonia," *Kritika* 8, no. 3 (2007): 565–569.

<sup>102</sup> Andrei Zorin, "Lotman's Karamzin and the Late Soviet Liberal Intelligentsia," in *Lotman and Cultural Studies: Encounters and Extensions*, ed. Andreas Schönle (The University of Wisconsin Press, 2006), 216–225.

new ways of thinking – attempts that nevertheless remained distinctly Soviet. Cult status was assigned to those who offered alternatives to official Marxism, which was increasingly seen by the intelligentsia as a lifeless ideological language, losing its potential not only to change the world, but even to interpret it.<sup>103</sup> These alternatives were considered entirely ‘other,’ belonging to Russian religious philosophy or European intellectual tradition. Yet the way this ‘otherness’ was perceived remained Soviet, as intellectual pursuit was inseparable from moral guidance, and professional relationships from personal ones.<sup>104</sup> The thought and personality of charismatic intellectuals were regarded by their followers and admirers as an integral whole, and the intellectuals themselves the embodiments of ‘true’ culture.

The intellectual cults of Losev and Averintsev examined in this thesis share common features: the same laudatory epithets, the same intonation, and similar strategies of distinguishing the cult figure from the Soviet surroundings applied to people with different personalities and styles of intellectual work. Yet the dynamics of these cults also vary significantly, depending on their social bases. In particular, Losev’s cult was built based on his *kruzhok*, whereas Averintsev’s cult rested on a broader, and ultimately less stable, basis of mass admiration. To draw an analogy, two buildings may be constructed of the same bricks; however, depending on their maintenance and exploitation, their condition and longevity can differ dramatically. I argue that we should study both the symbolic ‘bricks’ from which such cults were constructed, and the socially determined ways of their exploitation.<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More*, 47–76.

<sup>104</sup> See: Alena V. Ledeneva, *Russia’s Economy of Favours: Blat, Networking and Informal Exchange* (Cambridge University Press, 1998); Lewis H. Siegelbaum (ed.), *Borders of Socialism: Private Spheres of Soviet Russia* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

<sup>105</sup> I do not address political cults in this work, as the mechanisms of cult-building were vastly different; unlike intellectual cults, political ones relied on the efforts of state or Party officials to maintain and organise them. Jan Plamper identifies five features of modern political cults (beginning with the reign of Napoleon III, 1851–1870) in his book on Stalin’s cult: (1) their audience are the social masses; (2) they spread through mass media; (3) they form in ‘closed societies’; (4) they rely on secular rather than religious sources of legitimacy; (5) they present a male leader as the embodiment of the entire nation. In twentieth-century Russia, these features were present partly in Alexander Kerensky’s cult, and fully in the cults of Lenin and Stalin. See: Boris Kolonitskii, «Tovarishch Kerensky». Antimonarkhicheskaia revoliutsiia i formirovanie kul'ta «vozhdia naroda» (mart — iiun' 1917 goda) (Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie, 2023); Nina Tumarkin, *Lenin Lives!: The Lenin Cult in Soviet Russia* (Harvard University Press, 1983); Benno Ennker, *Formirovanie kul'ta Lenina v Sovetskom Soiuze* (ROSSPEN,

## Sources and Methods

This dissertation draws on three key types of sources. The first is scholarly texts. I analyse the theoretical and historical works of the ‘late’ Losev (1960s–1980s) and Averintsev (1960s–2000s), in which they developed ways of conceptualising culture as alternatives to the official Marxist approach. I also analyse texts about Losev and Averintsev by fellow scholars, many of which combined elements of research and memoir, and aimed not only to comment on their work but also to construct or maintain their cult images. The study of the life and work of a prominent scholar is a necessary component of intellectual canonisation, and I examine how, in the 1990s and 2010s, Losev’s followers undertook extensive collective labour to publish his works and comment on them, thus securing his place in the Russian philosophical canon. Averintsev has received much less scholarly attention and, as a result, his intellectual cult is gradually fading; however, as I will show below, due to his public activity from the late 1980s to the early 2000s, texts about him and his works often take on an overtly political tone, while his symbolic capital is primarily exploited by representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church.

Secondly, I analyse memoirs about Losev and Averintsev. The most important of these are the book *Aleksei Fedorovich Losev. Sergei Sergeevich Averintsev* (2004) by the philosopher Vladimir Bibikhin, a collection of notes from conversations with Losev and Averintsev, as well as his impressions and reflections on both of them over four decades (1964–2004);<sup>106</sup> the book *Losev* (1997) by Aza Takho-Godi, presents a hagiographic version of his biography as the life of a great philosopher and righteous man;<sup>107</sup> the work of Viacheslav Shestakov, a former member of the *kruzhok*, who offers an alternative narrative about Losev, distancing

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2011); Jan Plamper, *The Stalin Cult: A Study in the Alchemy of Power* (Hoover Institution, Stanford University, 2012).

<sup>106</sup> Bibikhin, *Aleksei Fedorovich Losev. Sergei Sergeevich Averintsev*.

<sup>107</sup> Takho-Godi, *Losev*.

himself from his intellectual cult while claiming a deep intellectual connection to him;<sup>108</sup> as well as collections of memoirs about Losev<sup>109</sup> and Averintsev.<sup>110</sup>

Undoubtedly, memoirs cannot be regarded as reliable sources that recount events exactly as they happened.<sup>111</sup> However, what is important for my research is that these texts allow us to form an idea of the image of a cult figure that existed in the individual and collective imagination, or, more precisely, of how a particular memoirist wished that figure to be perceived by the audience. For example, the philosopher Renata Galtseva (1936–2021) claims in her memoirs that she discussed with Averintsev (apparently in 1990 or 1991) the idea of a law prohibiting sexual scenes and obscene language.<sup>112</sup> We cannot know whether they in fact had that conversation, and, if they did, what exactly Averintsev said to her, or, whatever he may have said in a private conversation, whether he was really prepared to initiate such a bill. However, we can state with certainty that in the early 2000s, when discussing the need for ‘moral censorship,’ Galtseva cited Aleksandr Pushkin and Sergei Averintsev as cultural authorities in support of her position. Then, based on other sources, including Averintsev’s own public speeches and articles, we can further assert that he was indeed a consistent critic of liberal ‘permissiveness’ and a proponent of politics grounded in Christian values.<sup>113</sup> Thus, when working with memoirs, I took into account how the author’s position (personal relationships, disciplinary affiliation, political beliefs, and so forth) shaped the image of Losev or Averintsev that the memoirist sought to convey to public. In

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<sup>108</sup> Shestakov, *Pod”emy i padeniia intellektualizma v Rossii*.

<sup>109</sup> Aza Takho-Godi and Viktor Troitskii, eds., *Aleksei Fedorovich Losev: iz tvorcheskogo nasledia : sovremenniki o myslitele* (Russkii mir, 2007).

<sup>110</sup> Dzhamilia Mamedova, ed., *Averintsev i Mandel’shtam: Stat’i i materialy* (RGGU, 2011), 171–217.

<sup>111</sup> On the distinctive features of Soviet memoirs and, in particular, their use by the intelligentsia to create and consolidate communities, as well as specifically to sustain cults of national intellectual heroes, see: Barbara Walker, “On Reading Soviet Memoirs: A History of the ‘Contemporaries’ Genre as an Institution of Russian Intelligentsia Culture from the 1790s to the 1970s,” *The Russian Review* 59, no. 3 (2000): 341–352; Irina Paperno, *Stories of the Soviet Experience: Memoirs, Diaries, Dreams* (Cornell University Press, 2009), 44–72; Benjamin Nathans, “Talking Fish: On Soviet Dissident Memoirs,” *The Journal of Modern History* (Chicago) 87, no. 3 (2015): 579–614.

<sup>112</sup> Renata Galtseva, *Pamiatnoe* (Tsentr gumanitarnykh initsiativ, 2018).

<sup>113</sup> See on this in the chapter on Averintsev.

addition, I tried, where possible, to compare different sources and verify information from memoirs with interviews; I paid particular attention to conflicting versions of events, as they provided an opportunity to access personal, professional, or political conflicts behind the conflict of interpretations.

Thirdly, this thesis makes extensive use of original oral history interviews. I conducted twenty long semi-structured online interviews with students, colleagues, and friends of the protagonists of my research: nine concerning Losev (December 2023–March 2024) and eleven concerning Averintsev (October–December 2024).<sup>114</sup> Their average duration was one hour and 40 minutes (the shortest lasted 50 minutes, the longest two hours and 24 minutes). Although my interviews focused on informants' recollections of their interactions with my protagonists, I faced the same methodological problems discussed by scholars who work with autobiographical interviews, such as the selectivity of memory and the retrospective construction of a self-image.<sup>115</sup> Speaking about Losev or Averintsev, my informants often shaped their responses according to recognisable genres — sometimes anecdote, more often a contemporary's memoir.<sup>116</sup> As researchers of Soviet oral history have noted, these difficulties must be addressed by 'rigorously cross-examining the evidence of interviews and checking it, wherever possible, against the written records,'<sup>117</sup> and, perhaps even more importantly, by patiently listening both to what is said and to what remains unspoken.<sup>118</sup> As a younger scholar approaching senior colleagues, I found myself in a communicative

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<sup>114</sup> See the list in the Appendix.

<sup>115</sup> Luisa Passerini, *Fascism in Popular Memory: The Cultural Experience of the Turin Working Class* (Cambridge University Press, 1987), esp. 19–64.

<sup>116</sup> 'This genre of self-narrative might be called the "contemporaries"' memoir, because it shows up so frequently on Russian bookshelves under such titles as "The Memoirs (*vospominaniia*) of Contemporaries (*sovremennikov*) about so-and-so," or "So-and-so in the Memoirs (*v vospominaniakh*) of Contemporaries (*sovremennikov*).'" The quality which most distinguishes such a memoir is that its author seeks self-understanding and self-explanation not by looking inward, in the Romantic tradition of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, but rather by focusing outward with an intense gaze on one particular community as it is located in time: that highly complex and divided social group which is often called the Russian intelligentsia.' Walker, "On Reading Soviet Memoirs": 329.

<sup>117</sup> Orlando Figes, *The Whisperers: Private Life in Stalin's Russia* (Penguin, 2008), 45–46.

<sup>118</sup> Catherine Merridale, "Soviet Memories: Patriotism and Trauma," in *Memory*, ed. Susannah Radstone, with Bill Schwarz (Fordham University Press, 2010), 277–278.

situation in which I could ‘speak the same language’ with my informants, establishing the ‘sociocultural understanding’<sup>119</sup> and trust necessary to talk about matters they deeply cared about.

I prepared two general guides for my interviews, but often had to depart from them considerably, tailoring the questions and following my informants’ accounts of their interactions with Losev or Averintsev, as, for example, the experiences of Losev’s young secretary and his colleague at Moscow State Pedagogical Institute were vastly different. I offered all my interviewees the option of anonymising their responses, and some chose to do so.

Among my informants, there were ten men and seven women; almost all of them were academics. Many had written research articles and/or memoirs about Losev or Averintsev, and in some cases, during the interviews, they reproduced ideas or even used the same formulations as in their published works. At the same time, in conversation, they usually spoke more freely and privately shared facts or interpretations that were not intended for publication (and are therefore not included in this study). Some informants asked to review the quotations from their interviews that I use in my work and, in several cases, slightly revised their statements. All these adjustments clearly stemmed from their concern not to appear harsh or disrespectful towards Losev, Averintsev, or other people they mentioned. Their high degree of reflexivity and attentiveness to wording show that they perceive certain subjects, such as the situation at the Philological Faculty of Moscow State University in the late 1960s or Averintsev’s communication with postgraduate students in the late 1990s, not only as significant but also as still having the potential to provoke strong emotions and even conflicts. My informants sought to avoid this by carefully calibrating their formulations.

Such concerns may have been the reason that some potential informants declined to be interviewed. Refusals were caused by suspicions of my ‘bias,’ which could be triggered by

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<sup>119</sup> Melanie Ilic, “From Interview to Life Story: Methodology and Ethics in Oral History,” in *The Soviet Past in the Post-Socialist Present*, ed. Melanie Ilic and Dalia Leinarte (Routledge, 2016), 6–7.

the list of questions (some insisted that I send it in advance) and even by my use of Bourdieu's approach in published work on other topics. My affiliation with the University of Oxford may also have raised concerns, given that I was conducting interviews during the war in Ukraine and amid the persecution of 'foreign agents.' In particular, it is regrettable that I was unable to arrange interviews with Orthodox priests who had been close to Losev and Averintsev, as their perspective might have enriched my research.

I am deeply grateful to those who agreed to speak with me and to share their experiences. I have sought to treat their words with respect. The quotations from interviews are given in my English translation; I have tried to convey the meaning as accurately as possible and to preserve the impression of oral speech (although, of course, some losses in translation are inevitable). I am aware that some of my informants may not agree with the conclusions I have come to in this work; responsibility for them rests solely with me.

## **Thesis Outline**

My dissertation consists of two main chapters and a conclusion. Chapter one focuses on Losev and his *kruzhok*. Firstly, I analyse Losev's intellectual strategy through his theoretical texts, reconstructing his theory of culture and examining his tactics of using Marxism. Secondly, based on oral history interviews and memoirs, I describe how Losev's *kruzhok* functioned in the 1960s–1980s. I examine in detail the roles of Aza Takho-Godi and his assistants in shaping and preserving his legacy. Finally, I analyse Losev's cult, from the *kruzhok*-based forms of veneration and commemoration following his death to his establishment as the 'last philosopher of the Silver Age' within the Russian philosophical canon. I trace this process of canonisation through publications in textbooks and encyclopaedias, as well as the creation of memorial and research institutions.

Chapter two turns to Sergei Averintsev. Firstly, I examine his intellectual strategy, which combined a demonstrative disregard for Marxism with skilful navigation of Soviet academia. I analyse his approach to culture, which relied on the search for key concepts and symbols in classical texts that constituted the normative foundations of 'worldview types.' Secondly,

I study the formation of Averintsev's intellectual cult, focusing on his public lectures as 'events,' as well as his lecturing style and tactics of self-presentation. Finally, I examine his later activity as a public intellectual and his attempt to position himself 'in between' opposing ideological camps. In the conclusion, I compare the intellectual and social strategies of Averintsev and Losev and summarise the results of my research.

At the heart of this study is the contention that, to understand late Soviet intellectual life in its complexity, it is necessary to analyse the interplay between theoretical, social, and symbolic factors. The original theories of culture developed by scholars such as Losev and Averintsev in the 1960s to 1980s were regarded by their authors and audiences as an intellectual alternative to Marxism (although they still engaged with it in one way or another, whether in the form of Losev's conceptual reworking or Averintsev's calculated gesture of disregard). The concept of culture could be interpreted in various ways within these theories; yet educated readers and listeners always attached immense value to it, viewing 'true' culture as an analogue of the sacred realm. Consequently, those who preserved and studied it became a kind of priests or guides who enabled others to gain access to 'other worlds.' They were revered by their followers and admirers as exceptional figures, and a personal relationship with them was seen as a transformative experience. These followers, as in Losev's case, could be members of a *kruzhok* engaged in collective work to preserve and enhance the Teacher's symbolic capital or, as in Averintsev's case, they could belong to a broader, yet more ephemeral, audience. However, in both cases, as I explore below, the social and intellectual strategies corresponded to each other; they brought people together in much the same way that they combined ideas.

## CHAPTER ONE. ALEKSEI LOSEV AND HIS *KRUZHOK*

Once, Stalin asked how things were going on the philosophical front. He was informed that only one idealist remained — Aleksei Losev. ‘Well, one is allowed to remain,’ Stalin replied.

This often-reproduced anecdote — through the paradoxical recognition from the highest Soviet authority — reflects the unique status of Aleksei Losev as ‘the last idealist’ in Soviet philosophy.<sup>1</sup> He is indeed one of the most curious figures in the history of Russian thought. His philosophical career extended from the 1910s, when, as a young Moscow University graduate, he began teaching and publishing, until his death in the late 1980s. During this period, Losev published an impressive number of works, including two dozen books and several hundred articles.<sup>2</sup> Not only did he study different subjects from ancient mythology to the philosophy of mathematics, but he also implemented a variety of philosophical strategies,<sup>3</sup> presenting himself as a religious philosopher who provided a theoretical basis for mystical experience, a respectable scholar of ancient philosophy or even a converted Marxist. He lived an exceptional life which merged devoted intellectual labour, religious searching, cautious adaptation to the political environment, charismatic leadership, and cult-building.

In this chapter, I analyse the philosophy of culture of ‘late’ Losev (1960s–80s) in both its intellectual and social contexts. Firstly, I reconstruct his holistic approach to culture, which regards various elements of a given culture as expressions of a single fundamental principle

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<sup>1</sup> This anecdote (or ‘apocryphon,’ as Losev’s followers put it) is reproduced, with minor variations, in numerous sources. For example: Viktor Troitskii et al., eds., *A.F. Losev – filosof i pisatel’* (Nauka, 2003), 303–305; Nadezhda Malinauskene, “Aleksei Fedorovich Losev. Lichnost’ i nasledie,” *Sretenskaia dukhovnaia akademiia*, November 19, 2010, <http://www.sdamp.ru/news/n2693/>.

<sup>2</sup> *Aleksei Fedorovich Losev. Bibliograficheskii ukazatel’. K 115-i godovshchine so dnia rozhdeniia.* (Moscow: Izdatel’stvo FAIR, 2008).

<sup>3</sup> I adhere to Bourdieu’s understanding of philosophical strategies, which combine intellectual and political aspects. In *The Political Ontology of Martin Heidegger*, Bourdieu points out that ‘a philosophical strategy is at one and the same time a political strategy at the heart of the philosophical field.’ Pierre Bourdieu, *The Political Ontology of Martin Heidegger* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), 59. In the Soviet context, it is important to consider the higher level of dependence of academic policies on Party and state ones.

(‘sensory-material cosmologism’ for ancient culture and ‘secular Neo-Platonism’ for Renaissance culture). Then, I examine Losev’s complex tactics of engaging with Marxism. The central part of this chapter, mainly based on oral history interviews, then focuses on reconstructing the structure of the *kruzhok* and analysing the relationships between its members; I approach the *kruzhok* as a community assembled around a charismatic Teacher and engaged in collective intellectual, social, and symbolic production. My main argument is that the eclectic structure of Losev’s theory, combining Marxism and Russian religious philosophy, is isomorphic to the eclectic structure of his *kruzhok*, which brought together very different intellectual and political groups. Finally, I reconstruct the process of creating and promoting Losev’s cult, looking at memorial institutions, memoirs, interviews, documentaries, textbooks, and encyclopaedias; I pay special attention to the strategies of inheriting Losev’s symbolic capital used by participants in his philosophical canonisation.

Losev was, as I explore below, a charismatic Teacher at the centre of his *kruzhok*, that is, an intellectual authority and a moral leader who not only offered knowledge and intellectual skills to his students and followers but also influenced (and in some cases shaped) their aesthetic tastes, moral assumptions, and religious beliefs. The *kruzhok* of friends, colleagues, students, and followers assembled around him in the 1960s was active in the 1970s and 1980s, and, after Losev’s death, in the 1990s and 2000s, continued to preserve his memory and promote his philosophy in Russian academia and the cultural field. *Kruzhok*, as a specific social form, played a crucial role in Russian cultural life, because, as Barbara Walker shows, through the intertwining of patron–client relations with anti-structural ‘communitas’ relations, it helped to address practical tasks, providing economic support, social guidance, and intellectual mentorship to its members, while at the same time giving them an intense sense of belonging to a community, close personal connections (‘I–Thou’ relationships), and the experience of self-transformation.<sup>4</sup> Late Soviet intellectual *kruzhki*, and in particular Losev’s *kruzhok*, were not opposed to official academic institutions; rather,

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<sup>4</sup> Barbara Walker, *Maximilian Voloshin and the Russian Literary Circle: Culture and Survival in Revolutionary Times*, 1st ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), 9–16.

they complemented them as a tried-and-tested social form for preserving cultural traditions and developing alternative forms of thought.

They were especially important for the creation of alternative canons, literary, philosophical, and others — the so-called ‘Hamburg score.’ The term was coined by Viktor Shklovsky, one of the key figures of Russian formalism, in the eponymous book in 1928. Shklovsky tells a story about circus wrestlers who meet once a year in a bar in Hamburg behind closed doors to reveal, without cheating or match-fixing, their real class. Shklovsky claims that ‘we need a Hamburg score in literature,’ suggesting a fair ranking of writers within the field of literature instead of the official Soviet hierarchy. For example, ‘Serafimovich or Veresaev are not there. They do not make it to the city,’ while Khlebnikov is a ‘champion.’<sup>5</sup> The concept of the ‘Hamburg score’ came to be widely used to mark alternative canons developed in the communities of intelligentsia in parallel to the Soviet system of positions, ranks and awards.<sup>6</sup>

Aleksei Losev, who held a rather modest official position in Soviet academia as a professor of ancient philology at Moscow State Pedagogical Institute, was widely considered one of the most prominent Russian philosophers of the 20th century by the ‘Hamburg score.’ His case is therefore well-suited for the analysis of intellectual reputations and cults. He is often described as a great philosopher, the last representative of the so-called ‘religious and philosophical Renaissance’ in Russia. Losev’s philosophical canonisation as ‘the last idealist’ who preserved and passed down the Russian philosophical tradition began in the late Soviet period (in the 1980s, he also received official recognition and was awarded the Order of the Red Banner of Labour, which, however, did not save his book on Vladimir Solov’ev from censorship), but culminated in the 1990s, with the lifting of censorship and the growing interest in Russian spirituality. This canonisation was largely secured by the intense activity of his *kruzhok*, which for many years was led by Aza Takho-Godi, Losev’s

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<sup>5</sup> Viktor Shklovskii, *Gamburgskii schet: Stat'i — vospominaniia — esse (1914–1933)*, Sovetskii pisatel' (Moscow, 1990), 331.

<sup>6</sup> See on ‘Hamburg score’: Mikhail Berg, “Gamburgskii schet,” *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie*, no. 6 (1997) and the discussion of this article in the section *Sotsiologia literaturnogo uspekha* in *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie*, no. 6 (1998).

second wife, a professor and Head of the Department of Classical Philology at Moscow State University. In the 1960s–80s, she organised the work of Losev’s many secretaries and assistants, facilitating the writing, editing, and publication of his books, and, after Losev’s death, in the 1990s and 2000s, she managed the symbolic activity of the *kruzhok* aimed at promoting his legacy in the Russian philosophical and, more broadly, cultural space.

This activity proved exceptionally successful. Losev became an integral part of contemporary Russian textbooks and curricula. For instance, in the syllabus of a course on twentieth-century Russian philosophy for students of the Faculty of Philosophy at MSU, Losev is the final figure closing the canon and one of only two, alongside Mikhail Bakhtin, who continued their intellectual work in the Soviet Union in the second half of the twentieth century.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, in the 2010s and early 2020s, he, like many other prominent figures of Russian culture, was politically instrumentalised (Aza Takho-Godi, very elderly by that time, for some reason, took part in this process).<sup>8</sup> In 2016, Vladimir Putin cited Losev in his address to the Russian parliament:

This [the Russian Revolution] is our common history, and we need to treat it with respect. Prominent Russian, Soviet philosopher Aleksei Fedorovich Losev wrote about it. ‘We know all the thorny path of our country,’ he wrote, ‘we know the wearisome years of struggle, shortage, suffering — but for the son of the Motherland all this is his own, essential and dear.’ I am sure that the absolute majority of our citizens have the same feelings towards our Motherland, and we need the lessons of history primarily for reconciliation, to strengthen social, political, and civic harmony that we have been able to achieve.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Mikhail Maslin and Vasilii Vanchugov, “Kalendarnyi plan lektsii dlia studentov IV kursa «Russkaia filosofiia XX veka». 2020/2021 uch. god,” Filosofskii fakul’tet MGU, [https://philos.msu.ru/sites/default/files/Календарный%20план\\_2020-2021\\_4%20курс\\_0.pdf](https://philos.msu.ru/sites/default/files/Календарный%20план_2020-2021_4%20курс_0.pdf).

<sup>8</sup> For example: Aza Alibekovna Takho-Godi: “Zhizn’ – eto Rodina i zhertva”. *Besedu vedet Vladimir Semenov*, directed by Biblio TV, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oHj-UJb95kU>.

<sup>9</sup> “Poslanie Prezidenta Federal'nomu Sobraniuu,” Prezident Rossii, December 2, 2016, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/53379>.

This opportunistic ‘patriotic’ interpretation turned Losev into an apologist for the united Russia and for rallying around the state flag regardless of any political disagreements. He is also mentioned as the author of ‘the worldview concept’ [*kontseptsia mirovozzreniia*] in the syllabus of the overtly propagandistic course ‘The Foundations of Russian Statehood’ [*Osnovy rossiiskoi gosudarstvennosti*], developed in 2023 by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education.<sup>10</sup> To understand how this transition from an alternative canon (‘Hamburg score’) to official recognition and even appropriation by the new state ideology became possible, it is necessary to examine the philosophy of the ‘late’ Losev in the context in which it was produced and received. The following section turns to this.

## The Eclecticism of Theory and the Wholeness of Thought

Aleksei Losev wrote philosophical histories of individual cultures rather than a theory of culture as such. However, in the late 1980s, when ‘culturology’ began to institutionalise as an academic discipline, he declared that his main works of the previous decades retrospectively constituted his philosophy of culture.<sup>11</sup> This interpretation was shared by his followers and scholars close to his circle. For instance, the 2000 full edition of *History of Ancient Aesthetics* [*Istoriia antichnoi estetiki*] is prefaced by Aza Takho-Godi’s article, ‘History of Ancient Aesthetics by A.F. Losev as a Philosophy of Culture’ [*Istoriia antichnoi estetiki’ A.F. Loseva kak filosofii kul’tury*].<sup>12</sup> Another example is the 2009 collection of works dedicated to Losev, published by the Institute of Philosophy of the Academy of Sciences and edited by Takho-Godi, which opens with Aleksandr Dobrokhotov’s article, ‘A.F. Losev — a philosopher of culture’ [*A.F. Losev — filosof kul’tury*]. Dobrokhotov’s text, although

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<sup>10</sup> “Proekt kontseptsii uchebno-metodicheskogo kompleksa modul’na «Osnovy rossiiskoi gosudarstvennosti»,” Portal federal’nykh gosudarstvennykh obrazovatel’nykh standartov vysshego obrazovaniia, April 21, 2023, [https://fgosvo.ru/uploadfiles//method/Ps\\_MON\\_MN\\_11\\_1516\\_PK\\_21042023.pdf](https://fgosvo.ru/uploadfiles//method/Ps_MON_MN_11_1516_PK_21042023.pdf).

<sup>11</sup> Aleksei Losev, “Filosofii kul’tury,” in *Derzanie dukha*, by Aleksei Losev (Izdatel’stvo politicheskoi literatury, 1989). The text has a subtitle ‘Answers to the questions asked by the *Voprosy filosofii* journal. Interviewer: D.V. Dzhokhadze.’ Yet in reality, it is a brief coherent summary of the main ideas of *History of Ancient Aesthetics*. The interviewer’s role is reduced to that of an imagined addressee.

<sup>12</sup> Aza Takho-Godi, “‘Istoriia antichnoi estetiki’ A.F. Loseva’ kak filosofii kul’tury,” in *Istoriia antichnoi estetiki*, by Aleksei Losev, vol. 1 (Moscow: AST, 2000).

unambiguously flattering, offers a number of accurate characterisations of Losev's intellectual style, such as his 'exceptionally succinct, logically precise, and figuratively compelling definitions of cultural types' and the typology of cultures based on 'a certain integral principle.'<sup>13</sup> He argued that Losev's

study of the logical structure of thought in a certain historical period is aligned with the attention to sociality and historical dynamics; the analysis of intellectual forms is condensed into a concise formula; the analysis of historical psyche, into a portrait, and it turns out that both are inseparable parts of the whole.<sup>14</sup>

Dobrokhoto, however, like many scholars close to Losev's circle, tended to interpret his texts of the 1960s–80s through the lens of his earlier writings of the late 1920s and ignore the late Soviet intellectual context.<sup>15</sup> I, by contrast, argue that Losev's philosophy of culture should be considered as part of the context of late Soviet cultural research, or 'culturology.' Further, I demonstrate that he proposed his own version of 'culturology': aesthetics, a philosophical subdiscipline traditionally associated with questions of art and beauty, but redefined by Losev as the 'study of expressive forms in any sphere of activity.'<sup>16</sup> This radical expansion of the definition allowed him to include virtually any cultural phenomenon within the legitimate range of research and therefore to claim for aesthetics a leading role in the study of culture.

Although 'culturology' was not fully institutionalised as an academic discipline until the 1990s, it began to take shape from the 1960s as a widespread and heterogeneous intellectual movement referring to numerous subdisciplines, such as philosophy of culture,

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<sup>13</sup> Aleksandr Dobrokhoto, "A. F. Losev — filosof kul'tury," in *Aleksei Fedorovich Losev*, ed. Aza Takho-Godi and Elena Takho-Godi (Moscow: Rossiiskaia politicheskaiia entsiklopediia (ROSSPEN), 2009), 22.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 23.

<sup>15</sup> Aza Takho-Godi formulates this stance very clearly in her editorial preface to the collection: 'However — and I emphasise it — the scholars who studied A.F. Losev's works and submitted their articles to this collection are unanimous in admitting that there is no point in trying to draw the line between Losev's early and late periods.' Aza Takho-Godi and Elena Takho-Godi, "Ot redaktorov," in *Aleksei Fedorovich Losev*, ed. Aza Takho-Godi and Elena Takho-Godi (Moscow: Rossiiskaia politicheskaiia entsiklopediia (ROSSPEN), 2009), 6.

<sup>16</sup> Aleksei Losev, "Estetika," in *Filosofskaia entsiklopediia*, vol. 5 (Sovetskaia entsiklopediia, 1970), 570.

cultural history, semiotics, poetics, aesthetics, and others. Unlike the ‘cultural turn’ in the European and American social sciences, which problematised cultural hierarchies and symbolic domination, Soviet intellectuals had predominantly normative approaches to culture, contrasting culture and unculture<sup>17</sup> and affirming the universal value of the ‘classics,’ that is, a corpus of canonised works of ‘world literature,’<sup>18</sup> art, music, and so on.

On the one hand, this intellectual movement was facilitated by a major shift in official discourse in the late 1950s and early 1960s, from the militaristic rhetoric of class struggle to the rhetoric of universalised socialist humanism, peace, and friendship of peoples.<sup>19</sup> This shift also made it possible to replace the understanding of culture as a superstructure that directly depended on the socio-economic base within the Marxist theory of reflection with the idea that culture was a relatively independent space in which universal human concepts and values emerged and circulated. On the other hand, new cultural research often diverged from official Marxist doctrine and expressed moderate and permitted intellectual dissent. Both conservative and liberal authors were engaged in such study. Among the latter was Leonid Batkin, who in 1979 published an article, ‘The Discomfort of Culture,’ [*Neuitnost’ kul’tury*] in the unofficial almanac *Metropol’*. In this publication, he argued against the dominant ‘safe’ understanding of culture as a stable, complete entity, equivalent to tradition, ‘crystallised in norms and standards, be it moral tenets or (always “highbrow”!) works of art,’ and opposed it to a non-moralist and non-hierarchical understanding.<sup>20</sup> However, this manifesto remained a rare exception in late Soviet cultural scholarship.

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<sup>17</sup> This opposition has political meaning. See, for example, Batkin’s criticism of Dmitrii Likhachyov *Notes on Things Russian* in: Leonid Batkin, “Zastoinye spory,” in *Pristrastiia. Izbrannye esse i stat’i o kul’ture* (Moscow: Kursiv-A, 1994), 243–265. About the political meaning of Averintsev’s works see: Ilya Kukulin, “Stilizaciya fol’klora kak vospominanie o Evrope: ‘Starye pesni’ i ‘Pesni zapadnyh slavyan,’” in *Stihi, smysly, prochteniya. Sbornik nauchnyh statej*, by Olga Sedakova (Moscow: Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie, 2017), 201–202.

<sup>18</sup> Galin Tihanov et al., eds., *World Literature in the Soviet Union.*, Studies in Comparative Literature and Intellectual History Series (Academic Studies Press, 2023).

<sup>19</sup> Alexander Bikbov analyses how this conceptual shift manifested in political speeches, as well as in academic works. Alexander Bikbov, *Grammatika poriadka. Istoricheskaja sotsiologija poniatii, kotorye meniaiut nashu real’nost’* (Moscow: Izdatel’skii dom Vysshei shkoly ekonomiki, 2014), 100–124, 217–231.

<sup>20</sup> Leonid Batkin, “Neuiutnost’ kul’tury,” in *Pristrastiia. Izbrannye esse i stat’i o kul’ture* (Moscow: Kursiv-A, 1994), 15–16. See also: Nikolai Kuposov, “O Leonide Mikhailoviche Batkine,” *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie*, no. 3 (2017),

More often, different political interpretations of culture largely drew on normative approach and the same eclectic combination of ideas popular with Soviet intellectuals. Among the most important of these were Oswald Spengler's philosophy of history and Lev Gumilev's theory of passionarity [*passionarnost'*]; Talcott Parsons's structural functionalism and Max Weber's social action theory; the history of mentalities developed by the Annales school; Russian religious philosophy of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of dialogue; and Iurii Lotman's semiotics of culture. Maxim Waldstein identifies philosophical discussions about the research methods in the late 1950s and early 1960s, as well as historians' interest in the 'human factor' rather than in the 'objective laws of the development of society,' as the points of departure for Soviet 'culturology.' He emphasises that, despite the differences between methodological and political positions, 'Soviet culturologists shared the presumptions of humanistic culturalist discourse, which tends to conflate the understanding of culture as a "way of life" and as the reservoir of the most valuable human achievements.'<sup>21</sup>

Diverging from Marxism, many late Soviet culturologists tended to 'shift from the teleology of progress to relatively stable cultural structures, or mentalities.'<sup>22</sup> Losev, however, in his theory of culture, combined a Hegelian grand narrative of the philosophy of history with a holistic description of a given historical period as a specific cultural type. His magnum opus, the eight-volume *History of Ancient Aesthetics*, a work that took almost 30 years to complete (1963–1994) and occupies a small bookshelf, was conceived as a systematic description of ancient aesthetic doctrines, but is in fact a philosophical history of culture, with the history of Greek and Roman philosophy as its core element. Aza Takho-Godi explains it as follows:

Aesthetics, as it is always the case in casual speech, was interpreted fairly simply — as the theory of beauty. No one could even think that A.F. Losev understood ancient

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[https://www.nlobooks.ru/magazines/novoe\\_literaturnoe\\_obozrenie/145\\_nlo\\_3\\_2017/article/12485/](https://www.nlobooks.ru/magazines/novoe_literaturnoe_obozrenie/145_nlo_3_2017/article/12485/); Aleksandr Dmitriev, "Batkin i marksizm, ili Snova ob «uiutnosti kul'tury»," *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie*, no. 6 (2019), [https://www.nlobooks.ru/magazines/novoe\\_literaturnoe\\_obozrenie/160\\_nlo\\_6\\_2019/article/21780/](https://www.nlobooks.ru/magazines/novoe_literaturnoe_obozrenie/160_nlo_6_2019/article/21780/).

<sup>21</sup> Waldstein, *The Soviet Empire of Signs*, 142–143.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

philosophy as an aesthetic phenomenon, as the maximum outward manifestation of the essence of philosophy's subject.<sup>23</sup>

It might seem that for Losev, ancient aesthetics was a niche that allowed him to return quietly to practising philosophy. However, Losev did not hide his philosophical project from 'ignorant' officials, as Takho-Godi claims;<sup>24</sup> on the contrary, he sought to promote a broad understanding of aesthetics in Soviet academia. In *History of Aesthetic Categories [Istoriia esteticheskikh kategorii, 1965]*, which he wrote in collaboration with Viacheslav Shestakov, Losev maintained that 'aesthetic categories are the most general representation of being. They are a kind of reflection of being that reforms and transforms life itself.'<sup>25</sup> Five years later, in the entry 'Aesthetics,' written for *Philosophical Encyclopaedia*, a compendium of key principles of Soviet philosophy, he offered the same understanding of aesthetic phenomena as 'the dialectical unity of the inner and the outer, the expressed and the expressing,'<sup>26</sup> that he had formulated in *History of Ancient Aesthetics*. Thus, he did not so much seek to deceive censorship as to participate in the establishment of the new discipline, Soviet aesthetics, advocating for a radical expansion of its epistemological claims from the sphere of beauty to the whole of culture. In turn, this required much more engagement with Soviet Marxism than is usually assumed in Losev scholarship.

*History of Ancient Aesthetics* was intended to provide a solid foundation for these claims. This book is difficult to analyse, not only because of its length but also because of its heterogeneous nature — it is a kind of bricolage of various genres and styles, including a philosophical treatise, an aesthetic study, a textbook-like history of philosophy, a bibliography, a transcribed lecture, philosophical prose, a conceptual historical work, and so on. Sergei Averintsev, who identified such 'variations and irregularities' in *Dialectics of Myth*, argued that they 'corresponded to something important in the unfolding of Losev's

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<sup>23</sup> Takho-Godi, "'Istoriia antichnoi estetiki' A.F. Loseva' kak filosofiiia kul'tury," 8.

<sup>24</sup> Takho-Godi, *Losev*, 82.

<sup>25</sup> Aleksei Losev and Viacheslav Shestakov, *Istoriia esteticheskikh kategorii* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1965), 8.

<sup>26</sup> Losev, "Estetika," 570.

thought,' as they presented the development of the tradition of Russian religious philosophy and allowed Losev to 'puzzle, not to say bewilder,' the reader.<sup>27</sup>

However, it is worth noting that, in the case of *History of Ancient Aesthetics*, the text's heterogeneity can largely be explained by the circumstances in which it was written. Takho-Godi points out that Losev took an interest in ancient aesthetics as early as the 1930s, upon returning from the camps, when he 'received a directive from the Central Committee of the CPSU(b) not to study philosophy, except for aesthetics, and only [to study] ancient mythology.'<sup>28</sup> His first manuscript, rejected by the editor of the *Iskusstvo* publishing house as non-Marxist, remained unpublished and was subsequently destroyed, along with the rest of Losev's house, in the bombing of Moscow in 1941.<sup>29</sup> In the 1960s, when Losev could publish again, he resumed his work on ancient aesthetics. By this time, he was almost 70 years old and could neither read nor write due to his poor eyesight, so he relied on the help of his wife and secretaries, who read aloud to him, prepared summaries of books and articles, and then took dictation.<sup>30</sup> Understandably, these arrangements had their effects on the text, as certain passages retain the qualities of oral, and sometimes very emotional, speech, while others appear to be summaries of secondary literature written by a diligent assistant with little to no comment.<sup>31</sup> The decades of work spent on the book resulted in repetitions, clarifications, and even revisions. For example, in the fifth volume, Losev described the development of ancient aesthetics using a simple dialectical structure — the transition from the intuitive philosophy of natural philosophers to the reflexive philosophy of the Hellenistic

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<sup>27</sup> Sergey Averintsev, "«Mirovozzrencheskii stil'»: podstupy k iavleniiu Loseva," in *Sofiia-Logos. Slovar'* (Kyiv: Dukh i Litera, 2006), 718–720.

<sup>28</sup> Takho-Godi, *Losev*, 246.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 247–248, 250–252.

<sup>30</sup> In more detail, see the subsection 'Inheriting Charisma: Secretaries.'

<sup>31</sup> For example: Losev, *Istoriia antichnoi estetiki*, 2000, vol. 5, 62–90.

period and the subsequent synthesis of intuition and reflection in Neo-Platonism<sup>32</sup> — while in the final eighth volume, the same process was presented in a much more complex way.<sup>33</sup>

Still, I argue that the heterogeneity of Losev's texts does indeed 'correspond to something important' in his thought: it reflects his intellectual strategy. It consists, first, of the methodological combination of Hegelian–Marxist dialectics of history and Spenglerian physiognomy of culture; and, secondly, of the development of a complex authorial position that includes philosophical, philological, and historical expertise, and thus allows Losev to claim a holistic analysis. Thus, Losev's intellectual strategy involved advancing simultaneously within official academia and the unofficial intellectual community. On the one hand, he developed an ambitious project of aesthetics as an academic discipline. On the other hand, he constructed the position of a universal or 'synthetic' thinker that was extremely important for his followers: one who transcended disciplinary boundaries, possessed vast and diverse knowledge, and appeared not only as an academic, but also as a musician, writer, Orthodox ascetic, and Teacher.

### **Dialectics of history and physiognomy of culture**

The heterogeneity of Losev's text was a result of his eclectic (or, in his followers' words, 'synthetic') philosophy of culture. Losev combined Hegelian-Marxist dialectics of history with Oswald Spengler's cultural physiognomy, that is, the philosophical portraiture of culture, identifying correspondences between various external manifestations and the 'soul' of a culture (just as human physiognomy claims to identify correspondences between facial features and psychological characteristics). He spoke quite explicitly about this methodological task in the late 1920s:

For Hegel, antiquity is a dialectical concept. For Spengler, it is a physiognomically accurately reconstructed picture. And these two concepts, despite all the efforts of both brilliant authors, will never be able to replace one another and render one another unnecessary. They need to be combined. And it is easy to combine them if

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid, vol. 5, 44–46.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, vol. 8, part 1, 790.

you do not lose sight of the entire originality of both the physiognomic and the dialectical methods.<sup>34</sup>

It was in *History of Ancient Aesthetics* that Losev accomplished this task. On the one hand, he consistently used Hegelian dialectical schemes. For example, the section ‘Marxist approach to ancient culture,’ that is, the characterisation of ‘the slave-holding basis’ of ancient philosophy, was in fact a variation on the master–slave dialectic from Hegel’s *The Phenomenology of Spirit*.<sup>35</sup> However, Losev developed these schemes in a materialist way,<sup>36</sup> aligning his judgements with Soviet Marxist doctrine. Applied to ancient culture, this Hegelian-Marxist dialectic pointed to the inexorable logic of the historical process: in their development, philosophical positions reach the point of self-negation and are necessarily transformed (‘sublated’) into other positions.<sup>37</sup> The Hegelian (‘the necessity of the immanent development of human thought,’) and Marxist (‘inexorable social necessity,’) components reinforced each other, making this logic inevitable and even ‘violently historical.’<sup>38</sup>

On the other hand, in every historical period, Losev sought to identify a primary principle, that is, a unifying idea or the key concept of a culture that would set it apart from others.<sup>39</sup> From his point of view, any culture is an integral whole, both material and spiritual, and the philosophy of culture is meant to discover the principle of its unity, which manifests itself in different areas, including politics, trade, art, and science.<sup>40</sup> This approach is very similar to

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<sup>34</sup> Aleksei Losev, *Ocherki antichnogo simvolizma i mifologii* (Moscow: Mysl', 1993), 64.

<sup>35</sup> For example: Losev, *Istoriia antichnoi estetiki*, 2000, 1: 42–47; 8, part 1: 443–446.

<sup>36</sup> See his critique of Hegel’s panlogism: Ibid, 8, part 1: 543–548.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, 2: 48–49.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, 2: 60. See as well Averintsev’s accurate description: Averintsev, “«Mirovozzrencheskii stil'»: podstup k iavleniiu Loseva,” 724.

<sup>39</sup> Losev used different concepts. He argued that within the Soviet philosophical discourse, the word ‘unity,’ seemed to be the most fitting, but ‘principle,’ ‘idea,’ ‘image,’ ‘prototype,’ ‘archetype,’ ‘symbol,’ ‘protosymbol,’ and ‘value’ could also be used, although they required additional clarifications. Losev, “Filosofiia kul'tury,” 219.

<sup>40</sup> Losev, *Istoriia antichnoi estetiki*, 2000, 5: 35.

Spengler's physiognomy of culture,<sup>41</sup> and although there are multiple minor differences,<sup>42</sup> the key one, in my view, is that Losev extended the physiognomic method to all levels of his analysis. While Spengler limited himself to a general description of ancient culture ('Apollonian') contrasting it with Western European ('Faustian') culture, Losev strove to discover the fundamental principle of ancient culture as a whole ('sensory-material cosmologism'<sup>43</sup>), the principle of a given historical period (e.g., 'the differentiated personality' in the Hellenistic era<sup>44</sup>), the principle of a philosophical school (e.g., 'the decadence' of the Sophists<sup>45</sup>), or even an individual philosopher (e.g., 'the rationalism and decadence' of Socrates<sup>46</sup>).

The problem was how to make such an analysis acceptable to Soviet academia. Certainly, the idea that 'fate and slavery are the same principle manifested in different aspects'<sup>47</sup> does not sound Marxist. Losev found, as we shall see, several original solutions to this problem: using (sometimes excessively) ideological rhetoric; redefining Marxist concepts; and adopting materialist dialectics as a research method. For example, characterising the ancient mentality in the late 1980s, he presented his conception as a kind of Marxist structuralism and maintained that slave-holding and ancient philosophy were structurally homologous (the master related to the slave in the same way as the idea related to matter).<sup>48</sup> Such an interpretation, although dubious from the orthodox Marxist perspective, was

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<sup>41</sup> Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, trans. by Charles Francis Atkinson (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1928), 46–47.

<sup>42</sup> As early as the late 1920s, Losev lists some of them, defending himself against accusations of Spenglerianism. See.: Losev, *Ocherki antichnogo simvolizma i mifologii*, 704–705.

<sup>43</sup> Losev, *Istoriia antichnoi estetiki*, 2000, 8, part 1: 396; Aleksei Losev, "Antichnaia filosofiia i obshchestvenno-istoricheskie formatsii," in *Antichnost' kak tip kul'tury*, ed. Aleksei Losev, Nataliia Chistiakova, and Tatiana Borodai (Moscow: Nauka, 1988), 36.

<sup>44</sup> Losev, *Istoriia antichnoi estetiki*, 2000, 5: 34–36.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid, 2: 26–27.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid, 2: 58–59, 94.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, 1: 64.

<sup>48</sup> Aleksei Losev, "Tipy antichnogo myshleniia," in *Antichnost' kak tip kul'tury*, ed. Aleksei Losev, Nataliia Chistiakova, and Tatiana Borodai (Moscow: Nauka, 1988), 100–102.

acceptable in late Soviet academia due to the consensual acknowledgement of the relative independence of the cultural superstructure.

The main solution, however, was to combine dialectics and physiognomy. Alongside the classic dialectical triad ‘thesis → antithesis → synthesis,’ Losev introduced a scheme of thought that can be presented as follows:

thesis ↔ antithesis

↑        ↑

principle

Thesis and antithesis oppose each other, but each of them expresses a primary principle in a different way. Such an argument, aimed at discovering a hidden unity in contradictions, is highly characteristic of Losev’s intellectual style. For example, the Apollonian and Dionysian elements of ancient culture oppose each other, yet both lack any qualitative or ‘personal’ definition, as the former is expressed only in qualitative relations (of symmetry, proportion, and harmony) and the latter in orgiastic fusion.<sup>49</sup> In the fifth volume, Losev used a simple example to show how such an argument can work: first, in the Hellenistic period, historical necessity led to the emergence of a principle of ‘differentiated personality’ (i.e., a person with a complex psychological organisation, more reflexive and sensitive), and then two incarnations of this principle, thesis and antithesis — a subtle and sensitive poet and a man of business with a flexible and creative mind — emerged and opposed each other.<sup>50</sup> This argument allowed Losev to remain within the limits of what was academically acceptable while radically reinterpreting Marxist concepts. In particular, he redefined the key opposition in Soviet philosophy between materialism and idealism: agreeing with Lenin’s axiom that the struggle between them is the essence of philosophy, yet contending that they ‘develop

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<sup>49</sup> Losev, *Istoriia antichnoi estetiki*, 2000, 1: 569.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid, 5: 35–36.

on the same socio-economic basis' and, therefore, stem from a shared primary principle ('sensory-material cosmologism' of ancient culture).<sup>51</sup>

Thus, Losev made materialist dialectics, albeit understood in a specific way, an integral part of his philosophy of culture. Its essence is the understanding of culture as this 'primary principle' or 'ultimate unity,' expressed in historically determined forms and their dialectical contradictions (aesthetics, defined as 'the study of expressive forms,' turned out to be a particularly well-suited term for his dialectical-physiognomic method of cultural research). Therefore, the task of the scholar — which Losev pursued across thousands of pages of *History of Ancient Aesthetics* — was to analyse diverse cultural forms and contradictions, seeking to discover these principles and to cast them into laconic formulas.

### **'Unity of life and creative work'**

Such intellectual work — the study of different spheres of culture, in order to understand it as a whole — required a combination of various skills and the development of a complex authorial position. Technically, Losev was a philologist and a Doctor of Philology who taught Ancient Greek and Latin at the Moscow State Pedagogical University. He accepted this identity, remarking that 'he works with terminology as a philologist.'<sup>52</sup> Indeed, terminological analysis is a crucial part of *History of Ancient Aesthetics*, as without it any philosophical reflection 'is doomed to archaic banalities and superfluous amateurism.'<sup>53</sup> For example, his reconstruction of Plato's doctrine of ideas requires meticulous consideration of 'particular phrases, particular terms and often even some little-noticed words and stylistic expressions.'<sup>54</sup> Philology here serves as the foundation for philosophical analysis, yet without philosophy, which focuses not on words but on the 'essence,' philology runs the risk of formalism. In this vein, Losev criticised Iurii Lotman and other scholars of the Tartu-Moscow Semiotic School for 'formalistic traits,' which he considered to be the result of

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid, 1: 49–55.

<sup>52</sup> Losev, *Istoriia antichnoi estetiki*, 2000, 8, part 1: 401.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid, 2: 173.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid, 2: 180.

terminological and methodological problems related to 'the conscious avoidance of philosophical analysis.'<sup>55</sup> However, even this dual position of philologist and philosopher appears to have been insufficient for Losev. At the beginning of the fifth volume, he described his approach as that of a 'historian-philosopher' who discovers the 'logical and historical necessity' beyond facts — as opposed to 'pure historians,' who delve into 'incredible intricacies' and the 'incessant tumble of events.'<sup>56</sup> Historical knowledge was also a necessary foundation of Losev's work, but in his view, historians, like philologists, often neglected conceptualisation, so he had to theorise for them.<sup>57</sup> Thus, Losev presented himself as a philologist, a historian, and a philosopher in one, which means that he claimed not only broad competence or an interdisciplinary approach but also 'synthetic' thinking that gave him an ability to comprehend the 'unity' of ancient culture.

Moreover, Losev went beyond the boundaries of academic scholarship, at times approaching literature or essayistic writing, thereby drawing the admiration of his followers and the criticism of some colleagues. In this regard, one of the most illustrative passages from *History of Ancient Aesthetics* is a short paragraph, 'On the characteristics of Socrates,' in the second volume. Losev offered a picture of Socrates's 'spiritual image,' which is highly vivid, dense, and emotional, reminiscent of the style of Friedrich Nietzsche or Vasilii Rozanov:

Socrates had it all, this imitation of truth that did not command but argued; this vulgarisation and democratisation of truth, these bad manners of verbal jousting on a market square; these giggles and Satire-like grins; Socrates had it all, and it was his strength. [...] He developed a new strength, this sophisticated, erotic, priapic wisdom,

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<sup>55</sup> Aleksei Losev, "Terminologicheskaiia mnogoznachnost' v sushchestvuiushchikh teoriiakh znaka i simbola," in *Znak. Simvol. Mif*, by Aleksei Losev (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Moskovskogo universiteta, 1982), 229–245.

<sup>56</sup> Losev, *Istoriia antichnoi estetiki*, 2000, 5: 7, 9.

<sup>57</sup> 'When presenting the history of Hellenism, everyone also demands to premise it on slavery. And yet, it is very difficult to get an answer to the question of what ancient slavery was and how exactly Hellenistic slavery differed from ancient slavery in general. Here, it would seem, historians should have bombarded us with many obvious facts from the history of Hellenistic, and in particular early Hellenistic, slavery. But this multitude of facts is nowhere to be found, and therefore we have to simply theorise in many instances.' Ibid, 5: 25.

and his smile made others mad, and his seemingly innocuous arguments irritated and unnerved the most spirited and the most assertive. Such irony is unbearable. How can you rein up such an elusive, sinuous shapeshifter? This is a satyr, a funny and terrible synthesis of a god and a goat. [...] He floats, languishes, fools around, lisps, giggles, and dives into the depths of human souls, only to then jump out unnoticed, like a fish from the net, whose tail you just saw flashing. Socrates is a subtle, mocking, whimsical, fiercely intelligent decadent who has gone through all sorts of hells and high waters. Around him, one should keep their eyes open,<sup>58</sup> etc.

This portrait does not aim simply to link Socrates's character traits with his aesthetic doctrine. Abundant with epithets and metaphors, rhetorical questions and exclamations, consciously modernising and eroticising ancient philosophy, this paragraph breaks with the usual, more cautious style of academic writing. Losev used various literary devices to present philosophy not as a detached research subject but as a personal matter, an issue of deep concern.<sup>59</sup>

Members of his *kruzhok* further explicated and reinforced his claim to disciplinary synthesis, linking the wholeness of Losev's research to the wholeness of his personality. On one level, they argued that he was a superior thinker who merged various disciplinary approaches; yet on a deeper level, they postulated the unity of thought and life behind the heterogeneity of Losev's texts and presented him not only as a researcher, but also as a teacher whose lessons concern 'all of us.'<sup>60</sup> For instance, in the introductory article to *History of Ancient Aesthetics*, Takho-Godi wrote:

One can be an excellent philologist and not understand the philosophical meaning of certain words. One can be a professional philosopher and not understand the linguistic specifics of the word. There should be a combination of two disciplines,

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<sup>58</sup> Losev, *Istoriia antichnoi estetiki*, 2000, 2: 92–93.

<sup>59</sup> Averintsev, among many others, admired this feature of Losev's philosophy: Sila. S.S. *Averintsev ob A.F. Loseve*.

<sup>60</sup> Takho-Godi, "'Istoriia antichnoi estetiki' A.F. Loseva' kak filosofii kul'tury," 25–26.

represented by one person. A.F. Losev became that person who from a young age already displayed the unity of life and creative work.<sup>61</sup>

His dual, philosophical and philological, competence is directly interpreted here as ‘the unity of life and creative work,’ whose intellectual complexity points to spiritual depth. In his memoirs, the philosopher Aleksandr Spirkin admired the fact that ‘one found it hard to guess his profession’ when listening to Losev speak:

There is linguistics [...]; there is philology in its broadest sense, with the analysis of the literary works of old; there is music, especially Wagner, who is gone through with a fine comb, as they say, in all biographic and artistic aspects as well as in terms of his worldview, with the analysis of the genius composer’s works not only on a professional level regarding music but also with a deep philosophical generalisation of his whole creative activity; there is civic history with incredible details from the lives of masters and slaves in the ancient world — when Losev talks about all this, vivid, figuratively illustrative images of concrete living people with their actions, habits, manners and opinions; there is philosophy — Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*, Hegel’s *Science of Logic*, Plato’s dialogues, works by Nicholas of Cusa, generously quoted from memory. And everything he talks about is tied into a tight knot and permeated by a cross-cutting thought that runs through the whole lecture or conversation.<sup>62</sup>

Thus, they insisted on the unity of thought and personality behind the variety of research subjects and approaches. Without taking this link into account, it is impossible to understand why, for example, first Aza Takho-Godi and then Viktor Troitskii identified the aim of Losev’s research into ancient aesthetics as religious,<sup>63</sup> since his book itself does not provide grounds for regarding it as a path to God. It is precisely the thesis of ‘the unity of life

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid, 33.

<sup>62</sup> Spirkin, “O lichnykh vstrechakh i besedakh s A.F. Losevym,” 555–556.

<sup>63</sup> Takho-Godi, “‘Istoriia antichnoi estetiki’ A.F. Loseva’ kak filosofii kul’tury,” 38; Viktor Troitskii, “Istoriia Antichnoi Estetiki,” in *Novaia Filosofskaia Entsiklopediia* (Moscow: Mysl’, 2010).

and creative work' that serves as the explanation here: if Losev was a scholarly monk, then his intellectual work was aimed at 'opening all the paths along which human thought wandered, from the cosmos as deified matter to God, the Maker and Creator of the world.'<sup>64</sup>

To summarise, Losev's philosophy of culture was part of late Soviet cultural research, characterised by a shift from the Marxist philosophy of history to the study of self-contained cultural structures. Losev, however, merged both approaches, combining the teleology of history with the 'ultimate unity' of culture, or dialectics with physiognomy. Unlike many other Soviet scholars, Losev did not confine himself to an academic niche but presented himself as a universal thinker unbound by disciplinary restrictions. He sought to grasp the 'primary principle' of a given culture, amalgamating philology, history, and philosophy. The essence of this eclectic intellectual strategy was to develop a research position that corresponded to the postulated unity of ancient culture, melting various theoretical approaches and academic disciplines into the wholeness of thought. Subsequently, the members of his circle and the keepers of his legacy added another element to this equation — the wholeness of Losev's personality. Not only was his philosophy described by them as 'synthetic,' but he himself, as we shall see in the sections on his *kruzhok* and canonisation, was presented as an exceptional 'synthesis of all types of cultures.'<sup>65</sup>

### **'I Apply Marxism When It Is Needed, and Do Not Apply It When It Is Not.' Losev's Tactics of Using Marxism**

Although this concept of universal synthesis allowed for 'even the ideas of the proletariat' to be in some form included in Losev's philosophy and personality, Losev was usually presented as a fundamentally non-Marxist author. Obviously, like any Soviet intellectual who aspired to be published, Losev had to comply with certain spoken and unspoken rules. Yet

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<sup>64</sup> Takho-Godi, "Istoriiia antichnoi estetiki' A.F. Loseva' kak filosofiiia kul'tury," 38.

<sup>65</sup> Aza Takho-Godi formulated this idea in an exemplary manner: 'The ancient cosmos with its finite space and Einstein, scholasticism and neo-Kantianism, the monastery and marriage, refined Western subjectivism with its mathematics and the musical element, and Eastern Palamite ontologism — this is the Losevs' way of life.' Takho-Godi, *Losev*, 171–172.

for scholars close to Losev's circle, it was crucial to demonstrate that even when engaging with Marxism, he stayed 'true to himself,'<sup>66</sup> that is, remained an 'idealist' who continued the tradition of Russian religious philosophy, and, contrary to the way he characterised his work himself in the *Philosophical Encyclopaedia*, never 'shifted to the Marxist perspective.'<sup>67</sup> I argue that, in fact, this 'last idealist' engaged with Marxism more seriously, creatively and ambitiously than many other late Soviet scholars who would routinely put only a couple of quotations from Marx and Lenin on the first pages of their work (or, like Sergei Averintsev, avoided it altogether). In this subsection, I identify three tactics governing his use of Marxism: 1) using Marxist rhetoric in a complex intellectual game, combining *strob* and the defence of his original intellectual work by ideological means; 2) using, redefining and developing Marxist concepts in his philosophical critique of Western individualism; 3) using the Marxist dialectical method to create a complex image of the Renaissance.

Losev's book *Aesthetics of the Renaissance* [*Estetika Vozrozhdeniia*] is especially revealing in this regard. Published in 1978, this work is a study of the history of aesthetic ideas, but equally a philosophical treatise on history and culture. In this book, Losev formulated the philosophical concept of the Renaissance as a specific type of culture, using the history of aesthetic doctrines mainly as illustrative material. He explicitly stated that his goal is to reconstruct 'the logic of the Renaissance aesthetics,' forsaking the chronological order of events and 'the confusion and disorder of endless factual contradictions.'<sup>68</sup> Aesthetics became the key to understanding the historical period since, according to Losev, the Renaissance culture was based on the transformation of ancient mythology and medieval theology into a 'subject of self-sufficient contemplation,' i.e. on desubstantialising of

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<sup>66</sup> Tat'iana Umanskaia, "«Esli zanimaesh'sia antichnoi filosofiei, to bez klassicheskoi filologii nichego podelat' nel'zia...» Interv'iu s A.A. Takho-Godi," *Voprosy filosofii*, no. 12 (2011): 10–18.

<sup>67</sup> "Losev Aleksei Fedorovich," in *Filosofskaia entsiklopediia* (Moscow: Sovetskaia entsiklopediia, 1964), 3: 255. The author of this short entry is not indicated. Viacheslav Shestakov, one of the editors of the *Encyclopaedia*, suggests in his memoirs that it was Losev himself. Given that he was the author of dozens of articles in the *Encyclopaedia*, this seems highly likely. Viacheslav Shestakov, *Pod"emy i padeniia intellektualizma v Rossii: Moi vospominaniia* (Moscow, Saint Petersburg: Nestor-Istoriia, 2015), 74.

<sup>68</sup> Aleksei Losev, *Estetika Vozrozhdeniia. Istoricheskii smysl estetiki Vozrozhdeniia* (Moscow: Mysl', 1998), 242, 294.

cosmos and the absolute, and turning them into objects of aesthetic pleasure.<sup>69</sup> This aesthetisation peaked in 'secular Neo-Platonism', which Losev identified as the main principle of the Renaissance worldview.<sup>70</sup> He presented the logic of historical development as follows: from medieval worldview to the beginning of the aesthetisation of theology during the Proto-Renaissance; then to the anthropocentric Neo-Platonism which organically brought together ancient cosmology and medieval theology, corporeality and spirituality, and finally, to the decay and demise of the Renaissance worldview, the loss of this fragile harmonious integrity and the transition to the cynical individualism of early capitalism.<sup>71</sup>

This book vividly illustrates Losev's complex relationship with Soviet Marxism. The circumstances of its writing are relatively well-known. The members of Losev's *kruzhok* talk about them in their memoirs due to the book's scandalous reputation and the split between Losev and Viacheslav Shestakov, a conflict within the circle that prompted the memoirists to dwell on this story and outline their version of events. Moreover, this book was deeply embedded in the Soviet intellectual context. Firstly, multiple studies of the Renaissance culture were published in the Soviet Union in the 1970s, and Losev cited some of them.<sup>72</sup> Secondly, Soviet historians and art critics reacted to Losev's book with a flurry of critical responses. Thirdly, the polemical strategy that Losev uses to defend his concept demonstrates that he not only anticipated such a reaction but also shared some basic presuppositions with his critics.

Let us begin, though, with Losev's own characterisation of his relationship with Marxism. The notes of Vladimir Bibikhin, a famous Russian philosopher and one of Losev's disciples, appear to be a good starting point as, spanning several decades, they feature multiple private conversations that Losev had with him or other trusted people. Bibikhin started to

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid, 98–99.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid, 257.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid, 146–147, 59–60, 616–623.

<sup>72</sup> For example: Aleksandr Gorfunkel, *Gumanizm i naturfilosofiia ital'ianskogo Vozrozhdeniia* (Moscow: Mysl', 1977); Lidia Bragina, *Ital'ianskii gumanizm. Eticheskie ucheniia XIV—XV vekov* (Moscow: Vysshaia shkola, 1977); Leonid Batkin, *Ital'ianskie gumanisty: Stil' zhizni, stil' myshleniia* (Nauka, 1978).

keep his notes in 1964 when he first attended the lessons of Ancient Greek that Losev held at his home for postgraduate students at the Pedagogical Institute and finished them not long before his death in 2004 with the description of Losev's friends and disciples, 'the old guard' led by Takho-Godi.<sup>73</sup> In the early 1970s, not long before Losev started working on *Aesthetics of the Renaissance*, Bibikhin wrote down some of Losev's opinions on Marxism. At the same time, he also recorded Losev's statements that already outlined the key characteristics of the Renaissance which were subsequently developed in the book.<sup>74</sup> In particular, Bibikhin's notes from 1973 already contain one of the main arguments of Losev's future work: 'The Renaissance is [...] a dramatic interpretation of Areopagite's Neo-Platonism.'<sup>75</sup> Therefore, these ruminations on Marxism are connected, at least chronologically, to *Aesthetics of the Renaissance*.

1) Even Marxism is such that it can't please everyone. One thinks one way, another thinks another way, and I think as I do. And I apply Marxism when it's needed, and don't apply it when it's not. (1971)<sup>76</sup>

2) I cite Marx and Lenin. But to say that everything boils down to the economy, that a thought is a discharge of the brain like Stalin does — you won't find this. There is something meaningful in what they call the basis. But there can be something in the superstructure that the economy does not recognise. The Orthodox church is not a superstructure of socialism. But what, Losev uses Marxism? Yes, he does, extensively. But does he share the extremes, the vulgarity of the 1920s? No. And

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<sup>73</sup> Vladimir Bibikhin, *Aleksei Fedorovich Losev. Sergei Sergeevich Averintsev*, 2nd ed. (Moscow: Institut filosofii, teologii i istorii sv. Fomy, 2006), 301–302.

<sup>74</sup> Compare, for example, the description of Mona Lisa. In Bibikhin's notes: 'Gioconda... Also a suspicious portrait. Firstly, [she has] a clearly lustful look; not a smile but kind of a grin. There is something scary in it, and there is lust at the fore, something lustful, summoning man to pleasure.' Bibikhin, *Aleksei Fedorovich Losev. Sergei Sergeevich Averintsev*, 201. In *Aesthetics of the Renaissance*: 'This is not a smile but a predator-like face with cold eyes and with a clear understanding that the prey Gioconda wants is helpless, and apart from its weakness, she counts on its powerlessness over the nasty feeling that engulfs it.' Losev, *Estetika Vozrozhdeniia*, 439. See also: Bibikhin, *Aleksei Fedorovich Losev. Sergei Sergeevich Averintsev*, 55, 63, 122, 194.

<sup>75</sup> Bibikhin, *Aleksei Fedorovich Losev. Sergei Sergeevich Averintsev*, 202; Losev, *Estetika Vozrozhdeniia*, 627.

<sup>76</sup> Bibikhin, *Aleksei Fedorovich Losev. Sergei Sergeevich Averintsev*, 57.

neither Hegel nor Plato can convince me that there is no correlation between the economic and the spiritual. (1971)<sup>77</sup>

3) I have thought through all of Antiquity from the sociological, historical perspective. Matriarchy, patriarchy, Athenian state, the downfall of the polis system – I have analysed everything. I can boast that I am the only one who worked out this whole giant structure in a Marxist spirit. (1972)<sup>78</sup>

4) Aza has to listen to Marxist things at the exam. But it is impossible to listen to Marxism! Impossible! (*A.F. hits his chest with his fist*) Such parroted words. It is incredible how such a catechism could have become established. (1973)<sup>79</sup>

Bibikhin's uncensored notes of Losev's speech, demonstrate that Losev shared the idea of 'two Marxisms,' widespread among Soviet scholars: Marxism as scholasticism and Marxism as a research approach.<sup>80</sup> If the former only sparked Losev's indignation, the latter evolved into a method in his scholarly work and was even framed as a unique intellectual achievement that he was proud of.

**Marxist rhetoric: intellectual games.** This tactic is deceptively simple. Certainly, Losev used Marxist rhetoric to ensure that his book passed censorship. However, this went beyond ritual expressions of academic loyalty, such as quotations from 'classics of Marxism-Leninism.' For instance, the following passage demonstrates how Losev switched to the language of newspaper editorials:

When the Renaissance 'realism' is discussed, it is often narrowed down to the fact that the Renaissance man wanted only to have a filling meal and a good drink and

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid, 106.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid, 136.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid, 196.

<sup>80</sup> See, for example, Mikhail Gasparov's analysis of Iurii Lotman's work. Gasparov argues that Lotman used a materialist, historical, and dialectical approach to analyse Pushkin's poetics, claiming that 'the Marxist method in social sciences was wide enough to accommodate those approaches that later constituted structuralism.' Gasparov insists on a strict distinction between 'two Marxisms:' an ideological dogma and a research method. Mikhail Gasparov, "Lotman i marksizm," *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie*, no. 19 (1996), 7–13.

satisfy his sexual needs without any difficulties or prejudice. And most surprisingly, such 'realism' is often called materialism [...] We need to say that for us, such understanding of materialism is rather derogatory for materialism and such 'realism' is a rather superficial phenomenon, devoid of ideology and deserving only criticism and contempt. If we are to talk about materialism and realism, for us, such a way of thinking and behaviour is full of deep ideological meaning, requires struggle against mundane praise of food and drink, and we interpret it as the construction of a human and humanity in the broadest sense.<sup>81</sup>

Here, Losev not only reproduced clichés but did it in an almost grotesque way, discussing the Renaissance with Stalinist ideological formulae, already outdated by that time, and even rhetorically elaborating on them in a manner more suited to a Party congress than a scholarly monograph. Some attentive readers of Losev have already pointed this out. For example, the writer Viktor Erofeev observed how deeply such 'plain' Marxism was incorporated into Losev's theorising: 'It seemed as if he consciously spoiled, spoiled his enormous work, even almost with a hint of masochism.'<sup>82</sup> Conversely, the philologist Gasan Gusejnov interpreted such passages as an intellectual game, as 'a jester's show, bringing back the traditions of foolishness for Christ.'<sup>83</sup> I would argue that they can indeed be regarded as an intellectual game, but a highly complex one in which Marxist rhetoric, often pushed to the point of absurdity, was nevertheless to be taken seriously.

On the one hand, his way of using Marxist rhetoric can be described as *stiob*, i.e. a form of irony or parody that, as Alexei Yurchak says, 'required such a degree of *overidentification* with the object, person, or idea at which this *stiob* was directed that it was often impossible to tell whether it was a form of sincere support, subtle ridicule, or a peculiar mixture of the two.'<sup>84</sup> Losev transferred terms and formulas, which were unambiguously recognised as

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<sup>81</sup> Losev, *Estetika Vozrozhdeniia*, 94.

<sup>82</sup> Viktor Erofeev, "Poslednii klassicheskii myslitel'," in *Strast' k dialektike: Literaturnye razmyshleniia filosofo*, by Aleksei Losev (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel', 1990), 7.

<sup>83</sup> Gusejnov, "Lichnost' misticheskaia i akademicheskaja: A.F. Losev o «lichnosti»."

<sup>84</sup> Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More*, 250.

elements of official Marxist rhetoric, to an unexpected context, and left his readers wondering about his intentions. Was he being earnest when describing the ‘titanism’ of the Renaissance man as if he were a Soviet Stakhanovite, endowed with ‘integrity, ideological commitment and true heroism in the social and political realm’?<sup>85</sup> And if so, does the ‘other side of titanism’ — unlimited self-assertion, disregard for any laws or rules, violence, and debauchery — have anything to do with Stakhanovites?

On the other hand, Losev’s use of Marxist rhetoric was pragmatic: it had a defensive function, which is exactly what Takho-Godi meant when she claimed that Losev used this Marxist terminology ‘to pierce his opponent as if with a spear.’<sup>86</sup> Unlike many other Soviet scholars, he did not limit himself to ritualistic references to Marx or Lenin but used Marxist rhetoric so copiously that in the 1970s–80s, the references were already seen as excessive. Vladimir Zhdanov told me in the interview that Losev had said to him, ‘I include quotations in the book — out of habit, I start with Marx, Engels and Lenin — but nowadays, the editors are cutting them out.’<sup>87</sup> It is possible, however, that Losev’s overuse of Marxism stemmed not only from a habit formed during a period of stricter ideological control, but also from a desire to preemptively defend his philosophical stance from colleagues, academic historians, whose disagreement and even indignation he could easily foresee.<sup>88</sup>

**Marxist concepts: an alliance with Marxism.** The next tactic applies to Losev’s use of Marxist categories. He not only reinterpreted several key Marxist concepts, such as ‘formation’<sup>89</sup>, but also developed and, in some cases, transformed the metaphors found in Marx’s and Engels’s writings into philosophical concepts. For example, explaining the specifics of the Renaissance individualism as bearing ‘all the features of a child-like and

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<sup>85</sup> Aleksei Losev, “Istoricheskii smysl estetiki Vozrozhdeniia,” in *Estetika Vozrozhdeniia. Istoricheskii smysl estetiki Vozrozhdeniia*, by Aleksei Losev (Moscow: Mysl', 1998), 711.

<sup>86</sup> Umanskaia, “«Esli zanimaesh'sia antichnoi filosofiei, to bez klassicheskoi filologii nichego podelat' nel'zia...».”

<sup>87</sup> Vladimir Zhdanov, slavist, Losev’s assistant, interview date: 08.03.2024.

<sup>88</sup> Unfortunately, the word limit does not allow me to develop this argument in this dissertation — I hope to do so in the future.

<sup>89</sup> Vakhitov, “Pozdnii Losev i marksizm.”

youthful character,<sup>90</sup> Losev followed the framework Marx used in *Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*.<sup>91</sup> Losev persistently developed this understanding of Renaissance individualism, describing it as ‘young,’ ‘beautiful,’ ‘honest,’ ‘naïve,’ and ‘innocent.’<sup>92</sup> Youth was not just a metaphorical characteristic of this historical period but a philosophical concept, Marxist not only in origin but also in function. Firstly, it was interpreted in correlation with the social and economic base — youth meant only a partial break with the feudal mode of production and, consequently, with the medieval worldview.<sup>93</sup> Secondly, Losev interpreted youth in a dialectic manner: on the one hand, it manifested the radical self-assertion of human individuality; on the other hand, it implied the tragic understanding of its limitations and even helplessness.<sup>94</sup> Thirdly, to describe this tragic understanding, Losev used the word *samokritika* (self-criticism), borrowed from the Soviet authoritative discourse, which can hardly be interpreted as *stiob*, as it relates to one of the key elements of his philosophical conception.

The concept of ‘titanism’ is another example of how Losev conceptually developed a Marxist metaphor. In *Dialectics of Nature*, Engels simply calls the Renaissance ‘the greatest revolution that the world had so far experienced’ and maintains that it produced titans<sup>95</sup> ‘in power of thought, passion, and character, in universality.’<sup>96</sup> Soviet historians and biographers repeatedly cited those words when characterising Renaissance artists.<sup>97</sup> For example, historian Viktor Rutenburg, the chair of the Committee for the Problems of the Renaissance

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<sup>90</sup> Losev, *Estetika Vozrozhdeniia*, 58–62.

<sup>91</sup> Karl Marx, *Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy* (Grundrisse, Penguin Books in association with New Left Review, 1973), <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/pdf/grundrisse.pdf>.

<sup>92</sup> Losev, *Estetika Vozrozhdeniia*, 58–65.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid, 98.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid, 56–58.

<sup>95</sup> The English translation is ‘giants;’ I use ‘titans’ to be closer to the Russian translation.

<sup>96</sup> Frederick Engels, “Dialectics of Nature,” in *Collected Works*, by Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, vol. 25 (New York: International Publishers, Progress Publishers, 1987), 319.

<sup>97</sup> Liliia Solomenna, “Istoricheskie vzgliady A.F. Loseva” (Dissertatsiia na soiskanie uchenoi stepeni kandidata istoricheskikh nauk, Tomsk, Tomsk State University, 2004), 127.

Culture at the Academy of Sciences,<sup>98</sup> did so in his book *Titans of the Renaissance* [*Titany Vozrozhdeniia*], published in 1976, i.e. two years before *Aesthetics of the Renaissance*. At first glance, Losev was no exception, and his reference to Engels<sup>99</sup> may appear only ritualistic, since Engels's remark that prominent people in the late 15th – early 16th centuries, encyclopaedists and adventurers, 'had anything but bourgeois limitations,'<sup>100</sup> is hardly related to the idea of the contradictory nature of the Renaissance worldview. But Losev did not limit himself to this quotation; he went much further, turning 'titanism' into a philosophical concept. He defined it as 'spontaneous [*stikhiinyi*] individualism,' seen dialectically in the unity of opposites,<sup>101</sup> i.e. its 'positive' and 'negative' characteristics. 'Titanism,' in his interpretation, was a form of radical self-assertion by a man who had liberated himself from the limitations of Christian morality and both aspired to reach the heights of creativity and rushed into the abyss of passion.<sup>102</sup> Losev used this dialectical description both to characterise the Renaissance in general and to examine certain personalities such as Michelangelo<sup>103</sup> or Machiavelli.<sup>104</sup>

Therefore, Losev simultaneously mocked the ideological formulae of official Marxism and drew extensively on Marxist concepts. He transformed them, sometimes rather significantly, and incorporated them into his narrative. In some cases, he developed Marxist metaphors into dialectic concepts. Most importantly, these concepts functioned as they were supposed to in the Soviet academic discourse. Soviet readers could be impressed by the descriptions of violence and sex in the chapter 'The Other Side of Titanism,'<sup>105</sup> but they were

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<sup>98</sup> See about Viktor Rutenburg: A. Rolova and G. Kurbatov, "K 70-letiiu chlena-korrespondenta AN SSSR V. I. Rutenburga," *Srednie veka*, no. 44 (1981), <https://www.srednieveka.ru/upload/journal/44.28-36.pdf>.

<sup>99</sup> Losev, *Estetika Vozrozhdeniia*, 57.

<sup>100</sup> Engels, "Dialectics of Nature," 319.

<sup>101</sup> Losev, *Estetika Vozrozhdeniia*, 142.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid, 667.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid, 457–458.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid, 572–574.

<sup>105</sup> Yet, borrowed, in his own words, 'almost literally, from the works of J. Burckhardt, F. Monnier, R. Saitschick.' Ibid, 122.

quite familiar with the Marxist methodological framework Losev relied on — Renaissance individualism stemmed from ‘the glorious flourishing of culture which developed based on the commodity-money economy fighting against secluded feudalism,’<sup>106</sup> etc.

Losev’s intonation was equally recognisable. Like many other Soviet scholars, he deemed it necessary to give a moral judgement of a historical period in general and of certain figures in particular.<sup>107</sup> In the book on the Renaissance, Losev was especially vocal and emotional in passing such judgement<sup>108</sup> as he condemned Francis of Assisi’s sensual naturalism,<sup>109</sup> Machiavelli’s disgraceful behaviour,<sup>110</sup> Leonardo da Vinci’s unscrupulousness<sup>111</sup>, Rabelais’s lack of ideals<sup>112</sup>, etc. In Losev’s view, all these diverse forms of everyday, religious and artistic culture are marked by subjective immanentism — the idea that all objective reality is essentially accessible to the human mind.<sup>113</sup> Losev’s critique of subjective immanentism unfolded at the junction of Russian religious philosophy and Communist doctrine as both Orthodox and Marxist worldviews reject Western ‘bourgeois’ individualism.<sup>114</sup>

This anti-individualistic moral pathos, backed by a schematic outline of the social and economic bases of the Renaissance culture, was compatible with late Soviet Marxism and allowed Losev to enter into a kind of alliance with it. In a 1985 interview with the writer Viktor Erofeev, he listed three points of intersection between his philosophy and Marxism: 1)

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid. 734.

<sup>107</sup> Gasparov also points to this characteristic feature of Soviet humanitarian scholarship: ‘And for him [Lotman], Radischev was indeed a revolutionary, and the Decembrists heroes, and Pushkin a universal genius, and even Karamzin turned out to be sympathetic towards the French Revolution. Yet they were far more complicated and deeper than their usual portrayals which could even be signed by good scholars. Meanwhile, for the official Soviet literary studies, while Radischev was good, Karamzin had to be bad. And it wasn’t so in Lotman’s works, which was annoying.’ Gasparov, “Lotman i marksizm.”

<sup>108</sup> He himself acknowledges this: ‘It is easy to be a moralist, and the author of this work on the aesthetics of Renaissance is fairly engaged in this moralizing.’ Losev, *Estetika Vozrozhdeniia*, 138.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid, 224.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid, 574.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid, 420.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid, 606.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid, 223, 253.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid, 630.

dialectics, 2) interdisciplinarity and the comprehensive understanding of culture 3) critique of capitalism, ‘the idea that the culture of the bourgeois West is doomed.’<sup>115</sup> The last stance distinguished Losev from ‘unorthodox’ Soviet historians such as Leonid Batkin,<sup>116</sup> who viewed the Renaissance in a positive light as the period when ‘high individualism’ took shape, implicitly opposing it to Soviet social and cultural order.<sup>117</sup> Conversely, Losev consistently opposed individualistic and anti-authoritarian tendencies in Western culture.<sup>118</sup> In this battle, Soviet Marxism turned out to be, if not his ally, then at least the enemy of his enemy.

Historian Nikolai Shaburov, who briefly worked with Losev as a secretary, talked openly about this alliance with Marxism in his interview with me:

Losev realised that his worldview could be formulated with the language of Marxist dialectics. Of course, they had one shared element, and that’s Hegel. Losev was not only a kind of an Orthodox Neo-Platonist; he was also a Hegelian. But what else did they have in common? A common enemy. A common enemy was what Losev himself called ‘bourgeois liberalism.’ Secular and liberal consciousness, subjectivism, Kant, positivism, and so on. And so, he thought that Soviet Marxism and his Orthodox Neo-Platonism were, after all, allies. You can notice it in his work on Wagner, where he made Wagner a kind of socialist. And of course, *Aesthetics of the Renaissance* is an absolutely astonishing book in this regard. There, it is crystal clear that the Middle Ages are great [...] while the Renaissance is horror and decay. But he somehow managed to explain that the reason behind this was individualism.<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> Aleksei Losev, “V poiskakh smysla. Besedu vel Vik. Erofeev,” *Voprosy literatury*, no. 10 (1985), <https://voplit.ru/article/v-poiskah-smysla-besedu-vel-vik-erofeev/>.

<sup>116</sup> Dmitriev, “Batkin i marksizm, ili Snova ob «uiutnosti kul'tury».”

<sup>117</sup> Aleksandr Gorfunkel, “Motiv vysokogo individualizma: Kul'tura ital'ianskogo Vozrozhdeniia v trudakh L.M. Batkina,” in *Chelovek — Kul'tura — Istoriia: V chest' semidesiatiletiia L.M. Batkina*, ed. Mikhail Andreev (Moscow: RGGU, 2002), 11–56.

<sup>118</sup> See its deep analysis in: Gusejnov, “Lichnost' misticheskaia i akademicheskaia: A.F. Losev o «lichnosti».”

<sup>119</sup> Nikolai Shaburov, historian, Losev’s secretary and listener of Averintsev’s lectures; interview date: 09.01.2024.

Thus, Losev adapted to official Marxist discourse as much as he transformed and adapted this discourse to his own philosophical conception and moral agenda. Western individualism as a common enemy allowed him to ‘shift to a Marxist perspective’ and ‘stay true to himself’ at the same time.

**Marxist method: dialectics of the Renaissance.** The third tactic involved the use of dialectical materialism as a research method. Losev contended that the common understanding of the Renaissance culture (anthropocentrism, realism, the break with the Middle Ages, etc.) is not entirely false, but incomplete, and in need of a more nuanced approach. As he put it, ‘Any traditional characteristic of the Renaissance — clichéd and one-sided, bearing all resemblance to an uncritical prejudice — immediately obtains full meaning once we expand it with some additions or, occasionally, with an opposite definition.’<sup>120</sup> Losev sought to describe the Renaissance dialectically, demonstrating its ‘deep contradictoriness.’<sup>121</sup> He argued that

All the incredible and unparalleled genius of the Renaissance artists lies in their deepest individualism, resulting in the depiction of the smallest physical traits of this individualism and this unprecedented psychology and at the same time, in the relentless self-criticism of the figures of the Renaissance, in the feeling of the limits of a single individual and the tragedy of their art that distanced itself from the ancient and medieval absolutes but did not arrive at any new and well-established absolutism.<sup>122</sup>

This combination of human self-assertion and ‘its honest and sincere self-criticism,’<sup>123</sup> Neo-Platonic humanism and the ‘immoral and bestial’ titanism<sup>124</sup> allowed Losev to create a more

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<sup>120</sup> Losev, *Estetika Vozrozhdeniia*, 44.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid, 62.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid, 65.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid, 100.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid, 121.

complex image of the Renaissance. He drew on Soviet ideological language ('relentless self-criticism', etc.) but also used the dialectical method to retain complexity in his analysis.

Losev first discussed the need to clarify and nuance the common understanding of the Renaissance in his book *Dialectics of Myth* in the late 1920s.<sup>125</sup> It would seem easy to establish continuity between the 'early' and the 'late' Losev as the key idea of *Aesthetics of the Renaissance* — immanentism, the aestheticisation of cosmos and the absolute — was already formulated in *Dialectics of Myth* in an almost complete form.<sup>126</sup> However, contrary to the title, in this image of the Renaissance, there was no dialectic. Rather, Losev simply followed Nikolai Berdiaev's and Pavel Florenskii's criticism of the early Modern European culture.<sup>127</sup> For instance, in *A Note on Christianity and Culture* [*Zapiska o khristianstve i kul'ture*, 1923], Florenskii called the establishment of human autonomy 'self-deification',<sup>128</sup> and Losev repeated this idea exactly in *Dialectics of Myth*.<sup>129</sup> From this perspective, the Renaissance was the first act of 'Satan's assault on God',<sup>130</sup> i.e. launching the transformation of the divine from super-existence to a subjective idea. Losev's criticism in *Dialectics of Myth* was as fierce as it was simple: the Renaissance was degeneration<sup>131</sup>, 'the world's greatest disaster'<sup>132</sup>, and the first step towards human self-deification, which peaked in the 19th century.<sup>133</sup>

*Aesthetics of the Renaissance* continued this line of argumentation to some extent while also engaging with materialistic dialectics, in order to develop an original conception. Here, Losev insisted that the Renaissance was not the beginning of Modernity, or the 'bourgeois

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<sup>125</sup> Losev, *Dialektika mifa*, 255.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid, 259–260.

<sup>127</sup> Solomenna, "Istoricheskie vzgliady A.F. Loseva," 108–110.

<sup>128</sup> Pavel Florenskii, "Zapiska o khristianstve i kul'ture," in *Sochineniia*, 4 vols. (Moscow: Mysl', 1996), 2: 549.

<sup>129</sup> Losev, *Dialektika mifa*, 283–284.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid., 261.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid, 381.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid, 255.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid, 262.

capitalistic formation,’ but a separate historical period.<sup>134</sup> Its cultural specificity was defined by social and economic factors such as ‘simple commodity-money economy’ and the flowering of independent urban handicrafts<sup>135</sup>, and manifested in the spontaneous aesthetic self-assertion of the man. Losev abandoned the characteristic of individualism as Satanism — on the contrary, he pointed to its harmonious nature and the entwining of corporeality and spirituality (especially in his description of the Platonic Academy of Florence<sup>136</sup>). His understanding of the period is materialist, as its harmony is embedded in the ‘historical economic essence of Renaissance’ and its equidistance from feudalist stiffness and bourgeois capitalist looseness<sup>137</sup>; and dialectic as this fragile balance arose from the unity of opposites and could be described with dialectic concepts, such as ‘youth’ and ‘titanism.’ The comparison of *Dialectics of Myth* and *Aesthetics of the Renaissance* demonstrates that the use of Marxism as a method allowed Losev to achieve his goal in developing an original critical conception of Renaissance individualism.

Thus, the ‘late’ Losev’s attitude to Marxism emerges as much more complex than usually understood. On the one hand, he indeed found a way to engage with official Marxist dogma to formulate his own ideas and ‘stay true to himself.’ He redefined and developed Marxist terms and Soviet ideological formulas, sometimes approaching overt parody or *stiob*. On the other hand, his own argument was transformed as he adopted Marxism as a philosophical method. In the 1970s, Losev used materialist dialectics to criticise Western individualism in a manner that complied with academic standards and did not contradict Soviet authoritative discourse. His intellectual strategy, therefore, was not that of ‘the last philosopher of the Silver Age’ but rather that of a Soviet academic who used Marxist rhetoric, concepts, and method to develop a philosophical conception of Renaissance culture and its moral critique.

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<sup>134</sup> Losev, *Estetika Vozrozhdeniia*, 98.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid, 625.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid, 323–331.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid, 100.

However, as I discuss in the next section, his followers saw him as not merely a scholar, but a great philosopher and charismatic Teacher, possessing an exceptional ‘force.’

## **The Circulation of Charisma**

In this section, mainly based on oral history interviews and memoirs, I examine Losev’s *kruzhok* as a community whose members experienced a formative impact on their subjectivities and took part in collective intellectual, symbolic, and social production. In the first subsection, I analyse his figure as the social and symbolic centre of the *kruzhok* and describe the communication tactics that allowed him to bring together diverse groups; in the second, I look into the efforts of Losev’s second wife Aza Takho-Godi to institutionalise Losev’s charisma and create canonical interpretations of Losev’s life and philosophy; finally, in the third subsection, I discuss how Losev’s secretaries participated in his work and then examine different strategies they used to inherit various aspects of Losev’s legacy.

### **The Charismatic Teacher: Aleksei Losev at the Centre of *Kruzhok***

It is hard to say exactly when Losev’s *kruzhok* appeared; it formed during the 1960s, was active in the 1970s and 1980s, and after Losev’s death, in the 1990s and 2000s it continued to preserve his memory and promote his philosophy in Russian academia and cultural field. But throughout this time, at the centre of the *kruzhok* — as its *raison d’être* — stood the figure of Aleksei Losev whom his disciples and followers perceived as a charismatic Teacher, i.e. an intellectual authority and also a moral leader, who taught them not only how to think but also how to live. Losev’s charisma often became the subject of members’ reflections. One of the most famous such descriptions belongs to Sergei Averintsev:

The first thing that one felt when Aleksei Fedorovich came out of his room, and the first thing that the reader feels when he opens his books, is that we are in the presence of a certain force. [...] The force cannot be reduced to the strength of mind, or to the strength of will, much less to bodily strength. It is rather something like a ministry, which some possess naturally, and some do not. [...]

I remember listening to one of Aleksei Fedorovich's last papers [...] If none of those present had ever heard of Losev, [...] even then they all would have become all ears and listened attentively. Even those who had been half asleep would have woken up immediately, because the impact of his force, the breakthrough of this force, was like an overwhelming force of nature.<sup>138</sup>

Averintsev's reluctance to define (and thereby limit) the concept of force, as well as the comparison with the ministry [*san*], makes it clear that Averintsev was referring specifically to pure charisma, i.e., the ability to 'teach them as one having authority,' even when presenting at an academic conference. Averintsev's eloquent characterisation is echoed in other similar testimonies. For example, the philosopher Vladimir Bibikhin used the word 'force' in a note from 1970:

I was at his place last night. He sat alone in a darkened office. Then he came out to me to the dining room. He is interested in people; he is friendly to them. Inwardly very calm. He has a lively, witty, and a little rude humour. [...]

There is something very masculine about him. His [book] *Ancient Cosmos*, which I have only just seen, is like striking fire. I know no one else with such a frightening, wild, primordial, almost blind force. To tear the veil from the sky, from the earth, from this stone! Scholarship without laxity; a living power.<sup>139</sup>

Vladimir Zhdanov in his interview told me a story in which Averintsev's hypothesis (that people who do not know who Losev is still fall under his influence) was translated into reality:

It was 1972, I think. [...] I simply brought a gift from the Caucasus; I wasn't on any kind of spiritual or intellectual quest. And then I saw Aleksei Fedorovich Losev. And, you know, it was an unforgettable impression. He had such a strong personality. You

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<sup>138</sup> Sergey Averintsev, "O sile A.F. Loseva... Beseda IU.A. Rostovtseva s S.S. Averintsevym," in *Aleksei Fedorovich Losev : iz tvorcheskogo nasledii : sovremenniki o myslitele* (Moscow: Russkii mir, 2007), 639-640. The published version slightly differs from the video recording which also showcases Averintsev's own charismatic manner of speech: *Sila. S.S. Averintsev ob A.F. Loseve*.

<sup>138</sup> Vladimir Zhdanov, slavist, Losev's assistant, interview date: 08.03.2024.

<sup>139</sup> Bibikhin, *Aleksei Fedorovich Losev. Sergei Sergeevich Averintsev*, 13-14.

instantly feel it – he appears so huge, majestic, solemn. And did you know that he was blind? Well, usually you can sense this human flaw, [...] usually there is some special attitude, sympathy or pity. Not here. His spirit immediately overwhelms you.

He made this kind of an impression not only on me but on everyone. I used to drive him to the meetings of the Academic Council and help him for many years. When Aleksei Fedorovich appeared, chauffeurs, medical staff, everyone felt that he was some kind of colossus, some kind of force, an absolutely extraordinary person. The taxi driver would immediately ask: listen, who is it, who is it? [...]

A kind of field immediately formed around him, when all the people realised that there was some kind of deity before them. I have never seen or felt such a reaction to any other person. And there he was – so huge, majestic, slow, and solemn. God.<sup>140</sup>

Zhdanov straightforwardly articulated what Averintsev only hints at. In his account, Losev's 'force' is immediately recognised not only by him, a graduate student who has just arrived in Moscow and is completely inexperienced in philosophy, but also by 'ordinary people,' far removed from intellectual life. Where Averintsev compares Losev's charisma to a ministry, Zhdanov drives the point home, calling Losev God. This quasi-religious characterisation gives him the words to describe the experience of Losev's charisma, extremely difficult to define, but highly impactful. This form of charisma could be perceived as priestly or even divine, since it is based on knowledge, linking its bearer to the realm of the sacred. This helps to explain why the theme of Losev's sainthood appears so often in memoirs.<sup>141</sup>

Certainly, not all Losev's followers conceptualized his charisma in (quasi-)religious terms. However, its secular understanding is also based on the same idea of the connection between two worlds, Soviet reality and the Silver Age, which was a cultural analogue of the sacred realm for the late Soviet intelligentsia. Vladislav Zubok argues that for the post-war generation of Soviet intelligentsia the legacy of 'old cultural mentors,' although often

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<sup>140</sup> Vladimir Zhdanov, slavist, Losev's assistant, interview date: 08.03.2024.

<sup>141</sup> Takho-Godi, *Losev*, 443; Galina Belova, *Pominaite uchitelei i nastavnikov vashikh (Pamiati Alekseia Fedorovicha Loseva)* (Moscow: GRAND-FAIR, 2012), 76, 92.

incomprehensible, nevertheless ‘appeared irresistibly charming’ and became the ethical and aesthetic alternative to the Soviet mainstream.<sup>142</sup> One of my interviewees recounts the circumstances of his acquaintance with Losev; in the mid-1970s, he was introduced to him by the philosopher Vasilii Sokolov. They exchanged a few phrases and then:

...he shook my hand, and that was when I trembled and felt that I was one handshake away from the entire Silver Age. I couldn't say anything in particular because of admiration and awe, but the acquaintance took place.<sup>143</sup>

This is a very telling characterization — the significance of the Silver Age as a cultural sanctity turned out to be so great that physical contact with it, established through Losev, triggered a strong emotional response of ‘admiration and awe.’ A similar response would be elicited by Anna Akhmatova, whose admirers, as Beth Holmgren notes, also ‘regularly compared her to religious figures — a mother superior, a novice, an anchorite.’<sup>144</sup> Lidiia Chukovskaia played an especially prominent role among them: ‘through constant awe’ she established Anna Akhmatova's status not only as a national poet but also as a national symbol.<sup>145</sup>

This connection to the Silver Age was very significant as it made Losev a guardian of cultural tradition, a bearer of knowledge about the vanished pre-revolutionary world.<sup>146</sup> Pavel Khazanov analyses in detail this elitist intellectual nostalgia for an imagined past. He argues that it was a point of consensus for liberal and conservative parts of the late Soviet Russian intelligentsia; they could envision the continuity with the imperial past in different forms, but

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<sup>142</sup> Zubok, *Zhivago's Children*, 163-165.

<sup>143</sup> Aleksandr Dobrokhoto, philosopher close to Losev's *kruzhok* and Averintsev's colleague at MSU; interview date: 21.02.2024.

<sup>144</sup> Beth Holmgren, *Women's Works in Stalin's Time: On Lidiia Chukovskaia and Nadezhda Mandelstam* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 71.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid, 70–76.

<sup>146</sup> This link is acknowledged both by his religious followers and those who denied the religious interpretation like Viacheslav Shestakov. See: Viacheslav Shestakov, *Pod"emy i padeniia intellektualizma v Rossii: Moi vospominaniia* (Moscow, Saint Petersburg: Nestor-Istoriia, 2015), 70–73.

both considered it as a foundation for their anti-Soviet attitude.<sup>147</sup> Losev's *kruzhok* reinforces this observation, bringing together people with very different views.

Thus, Losev's charisma made a strong impression across his students and followers who, nonetheless, did not interpret it in the same way. Multiple groups around Losev perceived him differently because he communicated with them in different ways. This is not so obvious when reading memoirs, which are usually focused on Losev as a cult figure and rarely describe in detail even his supporters or friends, let alone members of other factions. Oral history interviews, however, offer the opportunity to shift the focus of interviewees' attention, to ask them directly about other members of Losev's *kruzhok* or to ask representatives of different groups the same questions. And even answers like 'I had nothing to do with them' or 'I never discussed this with Losev' are useful as they provide information that memoirs cannot.

For example, in the memoirs of Galina Belova, the editor of the publishing house *Iskusstvo* in the 1970s and later Losev's housekeeper, who was his ardent admirer, there is a curious description of how people close to Losev used to tell him about important events and changes in their lives.<sup>148</sup> She writes, for example, that Vladimir Bibikhin was long unable to tell Losev about his divorce, and at the same time felt that 'it was impossible not to tell [him].'<sup>149</sup> Belova mentions several such stories, giving the impression that this was a common practice in Losev's circle. However, when I began to interview members of the *kruzhok*, my interviewees told me one after another that they had never discussed personal matters with Losev, either because they themselves did not want to do so, or because Losev avoided such discussions. This was the predominant tendency until I talked to Vladimir Zhdanov, who eloquently told me about these kinds of conversations, linking the need for them on the part of the members of the *kruzhok* directly to Losev's charisma.

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<sup>147</sup> Pavel Khazanov, *The Russia That We Have Lost: Pre-Soviet Past as Anti-Soviet Discourse* (Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2023), 7.

<sup>148</sup> Belova, *Pominaite uchitelei i nastavnikov vashikh*, 4–6.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

One could tell him everything. [...] He told me that one very famous man, I won't mention his name, had told him how he had beaten his wife.

— *And why did he decide he should tell Losev about it?*

Because you are standing before God. You have a lot on your mind, who are you going to tell? You had a fight with your wife, she said something wrong to you, and you hit her in the eye. And so, who are you going to tell this then? Will you tell your friends? Will you talk about it in the department? No. And there was Aleksei Fedorovich, a saint, a deity. As you are on trial, and you must lay out your soul. [...] You have a desire inside, psychologically justified, to confess. In this case Aleksei Fedorovich acted as a priest to whom one confesses. This was his strength of spirit. His special, well... energy, you know?<sup>150</sup>

Interviews give the opportunity to collect stories which did not fit into the memoir narrative frame, to nuance the overall picture and clarify the intra-group boundaries and lines of tension. They showed not only that Losev followed different communicative patterns with different *kruzhok* members, which they seem not to have considered as contradicting the 'wholeness' of his personality but could make them feel anxious or offended. For instance, Igor' Makhan'kov, one of Losev's secretaries, told me that he would finish work and leave Losev's house when 'important' guests would start gathering for dinner.

There was a certain friendship, mutual warmth, no doubt [...] Nonetheless, Aza Alibekovna sorts through people: some are important, and some are not. And, well, who am I? A philosophy student. Just – phew. I remember there were some gatherings; I left when other people started gathering.<sup>151</sup>

This quotation clearly reflects the resentment of a young philosopher and a translator who was not satisfied with his position in the *kruzhok*. He spent much time working with Losev and considered himself to be 'perhaps, the best secretary' (or, at least, one of the two best).

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<sup>150</sup> Vladimir Zhdanov, slavist, Losev's assistant, interview date: 08.03.2024.

<sup>151</sup> Igor' Makhan'kov, translator, Losev's secretary, interview date: 04.02.2024.

He also mentioned that when he read Vladimir Bibikhin's book, he thought that Bibikhin had not performed his duties well if he had time for idle talk. Understandably, he expressed aggravation at not having been invited to the table or to certain conversations, as he was thought to be insignificant. 'Who am I?' he asked bitterly; this emotion allows us to highlight the intragroup boundaries.

This conclusion went beyond the simple fact that Losev treated different people differently and did not discuss private matters with all his acquaintances. I argue that his communication style allowed him not only to adapt to both written and unwritten rules of Soviet intellectual life but also to form alliances and gather many diverse people around him. Just as Losev synthesised different approaches in his theory of culture, he brought together different and sometimes even opposing intellectual, political or social groups: students and professors, anti-Semites and Jews, conservatives and liberals, religious and secular people, etc.

Firstly, this tactic required caution to avoid tension or even conflicts between those diverse groups. And having been through the Gulag, Losev was extremely cautious to the end of his life. My interviewees describe his communicative style in similar terms: he avoided certain topics and straightforward characterisations, did not admonish or preach, respected his interlocutors, and was reserved and ironic.

Aleksei Fedorovich's manner was irony, a chuckle, a smile. Especially with a guest, he was never aggressive. He just listened, smiled, ironised a little. [...] He did not pressure people in any way, did not call for anything, and did not argue with anyone. He was smiling, ironic, philosophical.<sup>152</sup>

Or:

He never commented on current affairs. No. Of course, I really wanted to know: what do you think about this person? But Aleksei Fedorovich did not... sometimes you

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<sup>152</sup> Vladimir Zhdanov, slavist, Losev's assistant, interview date: 08.03.2024.

would even ask such a question, and he never said anything. After all, the past had its effect on him.

— *So, he was cautious?*

I think he was, yes. Yes.<sup>153</sup>

Strictly speaking, this manner is not typical of a charismatic leader who, as Max Weber pointed out in his seminal work *Economy and Society*, often claims his right to abolish the old norms and establish new ones for his followers, according to the formula from the Gospels ‘It is written...but I say to you...’<sup>154</sup> However, in Soviet times, such a manifestation of charisma would have been politically risky, and, therefore, unsafe. Gasan Gusejnov explained Losev’s refusal to call things by their name by the fear that haunted him:

I asked him, how long have you had this fear? He came out of the camp, and Stalin lived 20 years after that. And then in Soviet times, they were all scarred by this fear. And Aleksei Fedorovich said to me — and I even have a dictionary of Soviet ideological language with this quote in it<sup>155</sup> — ‘Fear? I had Stalin standing behind me with an axe.’ I immediately wrote these words down, but they stuck in my memory, of course. It was the end of the 1970s.

— *Did that mean that in post-Stalinist times, he had nothing to fear?*

On the contrary. It meant that it was such a fear that was etched in him forever.<sup>156</sup>

Secondly, such a cautious communicative tactic, which always left Losev’s opinion not fully articulated, allowed him to have people from diverse groups in his circle. Skilfully balancing between them, avoiding final definitions, Losev left open the possibility of their interpreting his words in different ways. Thus, by giving the members of his *kruzhok* the opportunity to

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<sup>153</sup> Anonymous, Losev’s colleague at MSPI, interview date: 09.03.2024.

<sup>154</sup> Max Weber, *Economy and Society: A New Translation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019), 376.

<sup>155</sup> Gasan Gusejnov, *D.S.P.: Materialy k russkomu slovariu obshchestvenno-politicheskogo iazyka kontsa XX veka* (Moscow: Tri kvadrata, 2003), 889.

<sup>156</sup> Gasan Gusejnov, philologist, Losev’s secretary and Averintsev’s colleague; interview date: 17.12.2023.

construct his image themselves in a way that best suited their beliefs, Losev could expand his network and his influence over Russian intellectual life, both official and unofficial.

Naturally, this resulted in conflicts of interpretation, as each faction claimed exclusive understanding of Losev's work and personality and attempted to present him as their ally. Traces of this symbolic fight for the 'true' Losev can be found in strikingly contradictory descriptions of him: for example, the use of the word 'Cossack' to describe Losev. The epithet stems from the fact that Losev was born in Novocherkassk, the capital of the Don Cossacks. He lived there until 1911, when he entered Moscow University at the age of 17. Although Losev was apparently only formally considered a Cossack,<sup>157</sup> this characteristic was important to some of his admirers. Petr Palievskii, a conservative literary scholar, in his speech given at Losev's 90<sup>th</sup> birthday, used this word as a form of praise:

I happened to hear people who saw Losev for the first time and didn't have an opportunity to talk to him: here is a classic German professor somewhere from Hattingen or Freiburg, or old Berlin — Hegel, in short. And yet, in no way denying the comparison with Hegel, this man is a Don Cossack who came from the same land where *The Tale of Igor's Campaign* [*Slovo o polku Igoreve*] and *Quiet Flows the Don* [*Tikhii Don*] had appeared, and his soul didn't lose anything that is tied to it.<sup>158</sup>

Palievskii presented Losev as a half-German professor and half-Cossack from Don, i.e. as a bearer of classical intellectual tradition and Russian culture, viewed through a nationalist lens. Palievskii argued that 'German' university scholarship (which is considered to belong to another world, to the exemplary academic culture) certainly impressed a Soviet person but could only truly thrive if rooted in Russian soil. The word 'Cossack' here points to this rootedness — Losev's inherent Russianness.<sup>159</sup>

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<sup>157</sup> Takho-Godi, *Losev*, 9.

<sup>158</sup> Petr Palievskii, "K 90-letiiu A.F. Loseva," in *Aleksei Fedorovich Losev: iz tvorcheskogo nasledia: sovremenniki o myslitele*, ed. Aza Takho-Godi and Viktor Troitskii (Moscow: Russkii mir, 2007), 549–550.

<sup>159</sup> This right-wing discourse refers to south Russian Cossacks without any relation to Ukrainian ones.

Aza Takho-Godi called Losev a Cossack as well, but in a very different sense. In an interview, published in *Voprosy filosofii*, she stated:

He had to fight [with officials and censors], for which he used this Marxist terminology, of course. To pierce his opponent as if with a spear. Like a Cossack, you know, just go and pierce! He was a staunch Cossack. And he also said: 'I am a cunning Cossack.'<sup>160</sup>

Takho-Godi, whose position lay at the heart of the circle, used this term more moderately. In her version, it served not as a political label but as a personal characteristic, encapsulating Losev's courage and cunning, the ability to beat the enemies with their own theoretical weapon.

And finally, Gasan Gusejnov, who was on the liberal flank of Losev's circle, presented a third interpretation in our interview. He was present at Losev's jubilee where Palievskii gave his speech, and this is what he had to say about Losev's reaction:

Palievskii said: 'Here in front of us is a man who appears to be like Hegel. And he is no Hegel; he is a Don Cossack.' And Aleksei Fedorovich whispered to me — I was not the only one to hear it, there were other people; it was a crowded room — 'What sort of Cossack am I? I was a deserter.' (laughs) During the First World War, he went to Berlin. [...] He treated them with utter disgust. I absolutely guarantee this. All this talk about Cossackness...<sup>161</sup>

Gusejnov preferred to present Losev as a part of the intellectual milieu of Moscow University and claims that Losev did not welcome the attempts to label him as 'a Cossack in philosophy.' For him, it was important to emphasise that Losev did not support nationalists, such as Palievskii, and treated them with irony or even disdain. To him, the word 'Cossack' seems to be an intellectually untenable and morally repugnant attempt to present Losev as a supporter of 'primitive' nationalism. Gusejnov sharpened and simplified — consciously or

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<sup>160</sup> Umanskaia, "«Esli zanimaesh'sia antichnoi filosofiei, to bez klassicheskoi filologii nichego podelat' nel'zia...»."

<sup>161</sup> Gasan Gusejnov, philologist, Losev's secretary and Averintsev's colleague; interview date: 17.12.2023.

unconsciously — Palievskii's argument by changing the formula 'Hegel and a Cossack' to 'not Hegel, but a Cossack' and thus making his nationalism seem even more primitive.

The topic of nationalism is clearly sensitive for Gusejnov, as he experienced racism in academia because of his Azerbaijani background, including from Palievskii, who told him that 'a person with your surname has to think twice before writing articles on the Russian language.'<sup>162</sup> That is why, while acknowledging the existence of the conservative right part of Losev's circle [*pochvennichestvo*], he simultaneously distanced himself from it and purified the image of his teacher, countering all possible accusations of his nationalism or antisemitism. However, answering my question about Takho-Godi's characterisation quoted earlier, he said:

I understand Aza Alibekovna, and I can't judge her as she had a very important task — she had to make sure his books were published.<sup>163</sup>

He accepted her moderate interpretation and her tactic as pragmatically justified in the situation when alliances with nationalists in academia could help to ensure publication.

This example gives us an insight into the differences in positions within the *kruzhok*. We can see how Losev's cautious and well-balanced communicative tactic made contradictory interpretations possible. We can trace how members of different groups competed to define Losev in a way that aligned with their intellectual and political preferences. And finally, we can reconstruct how a compromise formed between both flanks around a moderate central position, which established Losev's Cossackness, but only as a personal, not political, quality. While Pavel Khazanov argues that such compromises were created in the ideological space through the shared elitist dichotomy *intelligentsia/narod* (whose conservative and liberal versions only differed by being explicitly or implicitly non-democratic, respectively),<sup>164</sup> this example shows that sometimes even this limited agreement was not required. The

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<sup>162</sup> Gasan Gusejnov, "Kloachnyi bes v ochazhnom dymu," Россия, *Radio France Internationale*, November 3, 2019, <https://www.rfi.fr/ru/общий/20191103-клоачный-бес-в-очажном-дыму>.

<sup>163</sup> Gasan Gusejnov, philologist, Losev's secretary and Averintsev's colleague; interview date: 17.12.2023.

<sup>164</sup> Khazanov, *The Russia That We Have Lost*, 44–45.

compromise that allowed conservative and liberal factions to co-exist in one *kruzhok* or in one official institution could be established and justified pragmatically, as a shared necessity within the unfortunate conditions of Soviet academia. Such pragmatic considerations, as I show in the next subsection, played an important role in maintaining Losev's intellectual cult.

### **The Routinisation of Charisma: Aza Takho-Godi**

Christianity is not the teaching of Christ, but of the Apostle Paul, Friedrich Nietzsche argues in *The Antichrist*. He writes that Paul invented Christianity by shifting the centre of gravity from the life of Jesus to his death and resurrection, and 'treated the history of Israel to another falsification, so that it became a mere prologue to *his* achievement.'<sup>165</sup> Underlying this fierce critique of Christianity is an important sociological intuition: the charisma of a spiritual leader is too unstable a foundation to create lasting organisational and symbolic structures, church and cult. The charismatic leader needs apostles who can translate the extraordinary qualities of his personality (his 'force') into reproducible forms, and can select, edit and comment on the stories about him to form a canon, i.e. institutionalise or routinise his charisma.<sup>166</sup> Losev's most active and devoted apostle, his Paul, was Aza Takho-Godi.

Aza Takho-Godi was born in 1922 into the family of the famous revolutionary Alibek Takho-Godi. In the 1920s, Alibek held several key positions in the government of the Dagestan Soviet Republic, including People's Commissar of Justice, People's Commissar of Enlightenment, and Deputy Chairman of the local People's Commissars' committee. In the 1930s, he moved to Moscow and worked there in the People's Commissariat of Enlightenment (*Narkompros*) and Central Committee apparatus, but in 1937, he was

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<sup>165</sup> Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, *The Antichrist. Translated from the German with an Introd. by H.L. Mencken* (New York (State): Knopf, 1924), 120.

<sup>166</sup> Weber, *Economy and Society*, 378–389.

arrested, accused of participation in a counterrevolutionary organisation, and executed.<sup>167</sup> Aza Takho-Godi's mother was sent to a camp as the wife of an enemy of the people. After that, Aza lived in Ordzhonikidze (now Vladikavkaz) with her uncle, philologist Leonid Semenov. As the daughter of repressed parents, Takho-Godi was unable to enter the Moscow Institute of Philosophy, Literature, and History, but was accepted into Karl Liebknecht Moscow Industrial Pedagogical Institute, which was, in 1943, evacuated and merged with Lenin Pedagogical Institute. In 1944, she started her doctoral studies at the same Institute and met Losev, who was a professor of Ancient Greek there. Takho-Godi became his student and assistant, and after the death of his first wife, Valentina, his spouse.<sup>168</sup>

From the late 1940s, Takho-Godi taught ancient literature and languages at Nadezhda Krupskaya Moscow Region Pedagogical Institute; in 1958, she started working at the Faculty of Philology at Moscow State University, where she eventually became a professor and Chair of the Department of Classical Philology from 1962 to 1996. She had a successful academic career, full of impressive intellectual and administrative achievements: she published hundreds of papers<sup>169</sup> and was the head of one of the most prestigious departments as well as its dissertation board, which allowed her to control the reproduction of the academic corpus. However, symbolically, she remained in the shadow of her great husband.

Nadezhda Malinauskene, Takho-Godi's former student who, among other talented postgraduates at MSU, was invited to work as Losev's secretary, wrote in the opening article of the collection of works dedicated to Takho-Godi's 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary: 'the preservation of the philosopher's legacy became arguably her [Aza Takho-Godi's] main activity, which also

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<sup>167</sup> See about Alibek Takho-Godi in section 'Aza Alibekovna Takho-Godi: istoki i semeinye traditsii' in: Elena Takho-Godi, ed., *Prinoshenie: Aze Alibekovne Takho-Godi ot blagodarnykh uchениkov i kolleg k 100-letiiu so dnia rozhdeniia: Fuga temporum* (Saint Petersburg: Aleteiia, 2023), 33–95.

<sup>168</sup> See a detailed account in her autobiography: Aza Takho-Godi, *Zhizn' i sud'ba: Vospominaniia* (Molodaia gvardiia, 2009).

<sup>169</sup> The list of publications on the website of the MSU Faculty of Philology includes 300 items. "Publications," accessed June 13, 2024, <https://www.philol.msu.ru/~classic/persons/takho-godi/publications/>.

left room for her own research, her pedagogical talents, and her leadership skills.’<sup>170</sup> Gasan Gusejnov, who was another student-turned-secretary, reflected on Takho-Godi’s position in a similar way, but much more straightforwardly and critically than would be possible in an anniversary collection:<sup>171</sup>

[It was] such a patriarchal environment where a woman, who had big ideas of her own and who could write a lot by herself and for herself, [couldn’t do so.] And she gave it all to someone else. In a sense, this is the tragedy of those times. No one would say that Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir are one philosopher. Although they were also husband and wife. But here, there is only Losev, and Aza Alibekovna runs errands. Which is not true! [...]

— *But she took part in it willingly and with enthusiasm?*

But of course! She was the one who organised it. She wasn’t like Sofia Andreevna Tolstaia, who just copied, but a person who organised the work of this whole apparatus. And then she looked through these texts again and edited them. And she was someone who could have ideas different to those of Aleksei Fedorovich. So, I feel sorry for her in this regard, as she withdrew into the shadows.<sup>172</sup>

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<sup>170</sup> Nadezhda Malinauskene, “Vek zhivi — vek uchis’. Zavet Azy Alibekovny Takho-Godi,” in *Prinoshenie: Aze Alibekovne Takho-Godi ot blagodarnykh uchenikov i kolleg k 100-letiiu so dnia rozhdeniia: Fuga temporum.*, ed. Elena Takho-Godi (Saint Petersburg: Aleteia, 2023), 14. Notably, even this collection has more articles dedicated to Losev than Takho-Godi.

<sup>171</sup> See, for example, his flattering text in the same collection: Gasan Gusejnov, “Zhizn’ i sud’ba Azy Alibekovny Takho-Godi. Razmyshleniia nad knigoi ee vospominanii k 100-letiiu so dnia rozhdeniia,” in *Prinoshenie: Aze Alibekovne Takho-Godi ot blagodarnykh uchenikov i kolleg k 100-letiiu so dnia rozhdeniia: Fuga temporum.*, ed. Elena Takho-Godi (Aleteia, 2023).

<sup>172</sup> Gasan Gusejnov, philologist, Losev’s secretary and Averintsev’s colleague; interview date: 17.12.2023.

This important characterisation allows us to identify the complex position that Takho-Godi occupied within Losev's circle. She consciously chose the role of the great thinker's wife,<sup>173</sup> which she subsequently described as spiritual service:

I, feeble and sinful, with neither such fierce faith nor such fierce force of love and prayer [as Valentina, Losev's first wife, had], also had to take care of A.F.'s books and work, as young and inexperienced as I was, when Musenka [Valentina] was still alive (she didn't have enough strength for this). After she passed away in 1954, it all fell on me, and I continued, as required, going to publishers and authorities in the Party Central Committee, to the ministries and the Academy of Sciences.<sup>174</sup>

On the one hand, this situation fits into patriarchal logic: the wife, 'as required', takes care of the routine, from chores to the exhausting toil of publishing her husband's book, circumventing the censorship. On the other hand, the very decision she made in her early twenties to live as a family of three with Aleksei and Valentina, in her own words, 'did not fit into any conventional categories.'<sup>175</sup> Unfortunately, not much else can be said about this intriguing family arrangement, as the only account we have comes from Takho-Godi herself. She describes joining the Losev family not as a romantic but as a religious experience and rebirth, 'finding her spiritual home.'<sup>176</sup> Therefore, caring for Losev was not just her marital duty but a form of spiritual service and even self-sacrifice. Like Valentina, she sacrificed a substantial part of her life so that Losev could write and publish his texts.<sup>177</sup>

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<sup>173</sup> In his biography of Leo Tolstoy, Andrei Zorin describes how his wife Sofia perceived her role of a great writer's wife in a similar way as 'a mission no less important than that of Leo's'. See: Andrei Zorin, *Leo Tolstoy, Critical Lives* (London, UK: Reaktion Books, 2020), 124–129.

<sup>174</sup> Takho-Godi, *Losev*, 197.

<sup>175</sup> Takho-Godi, *Zhizn' i sud'ba*, 285.

<sup>176</sup> 'The future for me is forever present, with Valentina Mikhailovna and Aleksei Fedorovich. And forever present is – as I understood with a kind of a sixth sense – is eternity itself, and that means, eternal joy together.' Ibid.

<sup>177</sup> Takho-Godi, *Losev*, 313.

Undoubtedly, this was a deeply patriarchal relationship; but, at the same time, Takho-Godi's spiritual service was not as much to her husband as *with* her husband, as she not only dedicated herself fully to Losev's philosophical work but insisted that he did too. Her self-sacrifice turned out to be very demanding as it required Losev to live up to his status of a great philosopher and work until the end of his days. In other words, it was not Losev himself but his work that became the centre of her world and the meaning of her life. This opened up scope for accusations that she lacked traditional feminine virtues and did not provide emotional support for her husband. For example, we find such accusations in one of Bibikhin's entries in 1980: Takho-Godi was not gentle or affectionate, as 'for her, he [Losev] was a working man for whom appropriate conditions had to be created.'<sup>178</sup>

'Creating conditions' did not only mean addressing practical issues ('copying manuscripts') but also organizing collective work on writing, editing, and publishing books with only Losev's name on their cover. She routinised Losev's charisma, i.e., provided regular and reproducible forms for the manifestation of his exceptional personal 'force.' Specifically, it meant doing chores and managing finances; taking care of health issues; recruiting secretaries and organizing their work; controlling visitors' access to Losev; regulating relationships within his *kruzhok* and moderating conversations; editing texts and facilitating their publication; and, after Losev's death, creating memorial and research institutions as well as would-be canonical interpretations of his philosophy. Aza Takho-Godi proved to be exceptionally effective in all of these tasks; she successfully built a durable social network that included talented postgraduate students, established academics, voluntary assistants, and influential bureaucrats. For instance, in the mid-2000s, she managed to retain control over the 'Losev House' Library by securing a letter from Patriarch Alexy II to Moscow mayor Iurii Luzhkov.<sup>179</sup> Viktor Troitskii, research fellow at this library, who corresponded with Losev from

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<sup>178</sup> Bibikhin, *Aleksei Fedorovich Losev. Sergei Sergeevich Averintsev*, 277–280.

<sup>179</sup> Anonymous, philologist, member of Losev's *kruzhok*; interview date: 25.01.2024.

1977 but only joined the *kruzhok* after his death, emphasised the utmost importance of Takho-Godi's social ties for securing the necessary support:

It [the creation of the library] was indeed an enormous endeavour which was undertaken mostly by Aza Alibekovna. Her organisational skills are phenomenal. She never forgot anything. She knew everyone she needed to know. No one could avoid doing what she asked. Moreover, she always had many assistants. First of all, from that very department [of classical philology at MSU that she was the head of] ...

Then she needed public support, official. Several collective letters had to be signed by different influential people. For example, I went to Boris Viktorovich Raushenbakh, our prominent scientist [physicist, academic at the Russian Academy of Sciences], who had enormous authority among people in power at that time. That is, the mobilisation of public forces happened from time to time. [...]

Also, [there were] good people in the Moscow government at that time. For example, the head of the Arbat district, Aleksandr Muzykantskii. He played a big role when we had to communicate directly with the Moscow Government.<sup>180</sup>

This is what makes Takho-Godi's position so interesting and complex: it combined self-sacrifice and power, or, in Pierre Bourdieu's words, the lack of symbolic capital ('withdrawal into Losev's shadows'), with an abundance of social and administrative capital. I will now analyse in more detail how her social and intellectual labour allowed her to define and shape the functioning of the *kruzhok*.

Firstly, Takho-Godi took care of Losev's health. In the 1970s–1980s, he was already an elderly man, almost blind and suffering from chronic insomnia. An extensive social network allowed her to invite doctors, masseurs, and healers (thanks to philosopher Aleksandr Spirkin,

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<sup>180</sup> Viktor Troitskii, Losev scholar, member of Losev's *kruzhok*; interview date: 01.03.2024.

among them was Dzhuna, one of the most famous healers of the late Soviet times<sup>181</sup>). However, in caring for Losev's body, Takho-Godi exerted control over it 'for the sake of scholarship and work.' Here is an interesting example from the memoirs of their housekeeper, Galina Belova:

And then, once we were done with all the errands, we started drinking tea. [...] But last time I noticed that he liked 'Mishka' chocolates and, having eaten one, audaciously demanded another one and ate it. Naturally, Aza doesn't allow him to have them as much. And she is right. [...] If you let yourself live 'sweet' [*vkusnen'ko*], you won't do much with your life, and consequently, won't achieve much in your work. Everything in this house is for the sake of scholarship and work.<sup>182</sup>

Secondly, Takho-Godi ran the household and paid the housekeepers, secretaries, and assistants. 'Aza Alibekovna was in charge of everything,' according to Belova.<sup>183</sup> Takho-Godi appears to have been a thrifty housewife. Igor' Makhan'kov recalls that he was paid five roubles a day for secretary work in the 1980s.<sup>184</sup> Vladimir Zhdanov received approximately the same amount:

I was paid a rouble an hour. But I was unqualified; perhaps Bibikhin received more. [...] When I drove Aleksei Fedorovich to the academic council, I also got paid. That is, I would find a car and get him in the car. We would go to the Pedagogical Institute. And then I would be paid five or even six roubles. Because the council would go on for three or four hours. By car, there and back. It was good money, in fact. If one tram

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<sup>181</sup> Takho-Godi, Losev, 361–362; Belova, *Pominaite uchitelei i nastavnikov vashikh*, 72.

<sup>182</sup> Belova, *Pominaite uchitelei i nastavnikov vashikh*, 38.

<sup>183</sup> Ibid, 66.

<sup>184</sup> Igor' Makhan'kov, translator, Losev's secretary, interview date: 04.02.2024. Stol'iarov gives the same amount. Aleksandr Stol'iarov and Ol'ga Kusenko, "Aleksandr Stol'iarov: «Otvechu Vam sovershenno chestno»,» *Istoriko-filosofskii ezhegodnik*, 2017: 237.

ticket cost three kopeks, and a lunch in the university canteen, 50 kopeks. And you got five roubles. Even a bottle of vodka cost less.<sup>185</sup>

Money was not the primary motivation for young secretaries and assistants, who saw the opportunity to work with Losev as a reward in and of itself. In some instances, they even worked for free, like Gasan Gusejnov, who called it ‘obedience’ [*poslushanie*].<sup>186</sup> Some found it inappropriate to discuss financial matters.<sup>187</sup> And even Igor’ Makhan’kov, who believed that he was underpaid and called Aza Takho-Godi stingy, said that he was happy to have worked with Losev and would have done it for free.<sup>188</sup> Examining dissident charity initiatives in the 1960s and 1970s, Barbara Walker shows how non-monetary work served as a means to transform groups of friends [*kompanii*] into networks of ‘self-giving solidarity,’ which gave its members a sense of emotional satisfaction.<sup>189</sup> Dissident groups differed significantly from Losev’s *kruzhok*, but in both cases, voluntary work served as a kind of social glue that helped form the sense of belonging to a community.

These narratives of financial issues reveal a clear distinction between a charismatic Teacher who is above dealing with money and the organiser who structures and institutionalises the practices of his disciples and followers. As Weber argues, rational economy is alien to pure charisma, and ‘a prerequisite of routinisation is the termination of charisma’s lack of connection to the economy.’<sup>190</sup> Losev did not pay wages; rather, his charisma manifested in

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<sup>185</sup> Vladimir Zhdanov, slavist, Losev’s assistant, interview date: 08.03.2024.

<sup>186</sup> ‘I never specified that amount. My mother forbade me to take the money, she said: “This is going to be your school, you have to do it as a novice.” [laughs] We did not share this religious rhetoric, but for me it was really a kind of obedience.’ Gasan Gusejnov, philologist, Losev’s secretary and Averintsev’s colleague; interview date: 17.12.2023.

<sup>187</sup> ‘We did not agree on the amount. If I had been told to work for free, I would have, perhaps, worked for free. After several sessions, Aza Alibekovna gave me a certain sum. I even said that it was too much. She waved her hands at me: take it...’ Nikolai Shaburov, historian, Losev’s secretary and listener of Averintsev’s lectures; interview date: 09.01.2024.

<sup>188</sup> Igor’ Makhan’kov, translator, Losev’s secretary, interview date: 04.02.2024.

<sup>189</sup> Barbara Walker, “Pollution and Purification in the Moscow Human Rights Networks of the 1960s and 1970s,” *Slavic Review* 68, no. 2 (2009): 388–389.

<sup>190</sup> Weber, *Economy and Society*, 385.

exceptional acts of gifting or lending money.<sup>191</sup> Belova characterises such care for friends and disciples as a manifestation of Christian love: ‘He did not only teach the youth, which is, of course, the most important thing; he not only cited their works or helped them get a job and make a living — he really helped them buy a house.’<sup>192</sup> Vladimir Zhdanov revealed in our interview that he was immensely grateful to Losev for his help:

When I defended my dissertation, Aleksei Fedorovich gave me 300 roubles on books. At that time, 300 roubles were a big sum. An engineer’s salary was 120–130 roubles. So, it was two salaries. And books cost very little, a rouble or one and a half roubles. [...] Aleksei Fedorovich congratulated me and said, here you are, Vladimir, to buy books. And then Aleksei Fedorovich helped me a lot. I didn’t have my own place to live in Moscow. I decided to buy a house in the Moscow region. Aleksei Fedorovich gave me money to buy a house.<sup>193</sup>

Here there is a very telling division of responsibilities: Losev gave gifts, while Takho-Godi paid wages.

Thirdly, Takho-Godi controlled who had access to Losev and moderated communication with him. Vladimir Zhdanov recalled that she was extremely selective:

Aza Alibekovna hardly let anyone come to Losev; a lot of people rushed to him, but she didn’t let anyone near, like Cerberus. [...]

*Did she filter some visitors?*

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<sup>191</sup> Losev could afford giving generous gifts as he received substantial author’s fees for his books.

<sup>192</sup> Belova, *Pominaite uchitelei i nastavnikov vashikh*, 67.

<sup>193</sup> Vladimir Zhdanov, slavist, Losev’s assistant, interview date: 08.03.2024.

Not some but all of them! Because loads of them rushed in. And there were lunatics, alcoholics, absolutely insane people, marginals. They would call, write, or some would come and bang on the door. And she protected Aleksei Fedorovich's peace.<sup>194</sup>

He could not tell me why so many 'marginals' took a great interest in Losev but remarked that in some cases, Takho-Godi 'somehow sensed' who could be admitted. According to Zhdanov, this was how pilot Grigorii Kaliuzhnyi<sup>195</sup> and musician Mikhail Gamaïunov<sup>196</sup> became members of Losev's circle. It is hard to say what the criterion was for the selection, as Takho-Godi herself does not mention it. It appears to be the spontaneous recognition of *svoi*, that is, people with similar social or cultural characteristics and moral values. While Alexei Yurchak widens the scope of the category of 'svoi,' using it as a synonym for 'normal people' who shared the late Soviet deideologised common sense,<sup>197</sup> I lean towards the narrower interpretation suggested by Juliane Füst, who considers 'svoi' as bearers of recognisable cultural and behavioural markers.<sup>198</sup> For example, Soviet hippies recognised each other by hair or taste in music,<sup>199</sup> and Soviet gay people — by gender-nonconforming speech.<sup>200</sup> For the intelligentsia, one of the most important aspects was a shared command of a literary and broader cultural canon.<sup>201</sup>

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<sup>194</sup> Vladimir Zhdanov, slavist, Losev's assistant, interview date: 08.03.2024.

<sup>195</sup> Takho-Godi mentions him among 'worshippers' who 'would come seemingly to ask several questions and then stay with us for years.' Takho-Godi, *Losev*, 421.

<sup>196</sup> In the 1990s, Gamaïunov wrote several research papers on Losev. He offered a nationalist and religious interpretation of his philosophy: in his view, Losev was not a 'Soviet scholar' but a 'Russian thinker' who drew on 'spiritual roots that fed on church and individual perspective of Russian history.' Mikhail Gamaïunov, "Ia igral na roiale Alekseiu Fedorovichu: Pamiati A.F. Loseva," *Russkoe Voskresenie*, 1998.

<sup>197</sup> Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), 102–114.

<sup>198</sup> Juliane Füst, *Flowers through Concrete: Explorations in Soviet Hippieland* (London, England: Oxford University Press, 2021), 56.

<sup>199</sup> Ibid.

<sup>200</sup> Dan Healey, *Russian Homophobia from Stalin to Sochi* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), 67–68. See also a very interesting discussion of Soviet queer *kruzhki*: Ibid, 98–102.

<sup>201</sup> See a very vivid example of self-reflection in Lev Rubinstein's essay: Lev Rubinstein, "Idu na my," in *Znaki Vnimaniia* (Moscow: Astrel', 2012), 79–85.

In several notes, Bibikhin writes that Takho-Godi moderated conversations if she ‘had reason to fear that A.F. [Losev] could “get carried away,”’<sup>202</sup> i.e., say something harmful to his reputation. For instance, she cut short Bibikhin’s questions when Losev started talking about his public support of Nikolai Marr’s linguistic theory in the 1930s.<sup>203</sup> Takho-Godi curated the formation of Losev’s ‘canonical’ biography, pruning elements that did not fit or potentially problematic details, which Losev could occasionally share with the most trusted people. Analysing Anna Akhmatova’s image-building, Catriona Kelly reveals a similar combination of a highly controlled biographical narrative and occasional ‘deviations,’ the latter of which the poet used to establish trust: Akhmatova would ‘ghost her own biography insistently repeating certain key anecdotes to confidants and visitors alike,’ which could be interrupted ‘with some running joke or humorous catch-phrase, suddenly turning her listener from devoted disciple and chronicler to intimate.’<sup>204</sup> While Akhmatova combined the roles of an authoritative biographer and a prominent person whose greatness was enhanced by her sincerity,<sup>205</sup> Takho-Godi assumed the ‘censoring’ functions on Losev’s behalf.

Fourthly, Takho-Godi organised Losev’s work, seeking help from her students and employees. She used her position as the Chair of the Department of Classical Philology at Moscow State University to hire promising postgraduate students as secretaries and assistants; to ask members of the Department (such as Isai Nakhov, Ol’ga Saveleva, and Valentina Zavalova) to review Losev’s books or to write research articles about him; and to push through to publication (*probivat’*) the publication of his works.<sup>206</sup> Therefore, as the

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<sup>202</sup> Bibikhin, *Aleksei Fedorovich Losev. Sergei Sergeevich Averintsev*, 277.

<sup>203</sup> Ibid., 270. See also: ‘I carried the whole of Stalinism on my shoulders. Each lecture, I would start and end with quotes about Stalin. I took part in circles, I was an activist, I agitated. Everyone was for Marr – and I was too. And then I condemned Marrism, otherwise I couldn’t remain a professor.’ Ibid., 173.

<sup>204</sup> Catriona Kelly, “Anna Akhmatova (1889–1966),” in *A History of Russian Women’s Writing 1820–1992* (Oxford: University Press, 1998), 219–220.

<sup>205</sup> See also Alexander Zholkovsky’s works on Anna Akhmatova’s strategies of self-presentation and cult-building: Alexander Zholkovsky, “K tekhnologii vlasti v tvorchestve i zhiznetvorchestve Akhmatovoi,” in *Lebenskunst - Kunstleben. Zhiznetvorchestvo v russkoi kul’ture XVII-XX vekov*, ed. Schamma Schahadat (Otto Sagner, 1998), 193–210; Alexander Zholkovsky, “Anna Akhmatova – piat’desiat let spustia,” in *Izbrannye stat’i o russkoi poezii* (RGGU, 2005), 139–174.

<sup>206</sup> Takho-Godi, *Losev*, 197, 349, 364–365.

organiser of the *kruzhok* and the creator of the cult, she relied both on informal social ties and official academic structures.

Takho-Godi not only decided who would work with Losev as his secretaries, inviting Gasan Gusejnov<sup>207</sup> and Boris Kaganovich<sup>208</sup> while objecting to Vladimir Zhdanov,<sup>209</sup> but also controlled work processes. Bibikhin points out that already in 1971, she ‘made sure that he didn’t let the secretaries stay in his study so that he would work and not talk idly and would write more; she asked how much was written, etc.’<sup>210</sup> Moreover, she edited Losev’s texts. It would require a separate study to determine how much she changed their content. However, both sympathetic<sup>211</sup> and critical<sup>212</sup> participants of the events agree that her interference was not limited to proofreading or indexing, but extended almost as far as covert co-authorship.

Lastly, after Losev’s death, Takho-Godi oversaw the final stage of the creation of his cult. She was actively involved in the creation of a number of memorial and research institutions: the ‘Losev’s Readings’ conference (from 1989 to the present),<sup>213</sup> the ‘Losev’s Talks’ Society (1990), the ‘Losev House’ Library (2001), and others. She oversaw the publishing and reprinting of Losev’s books and articles: in particular, she completed the publication of

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<sup>207</sup> Gasan Gusejnov, philologist, Losev’s secretary and Averintsev’s colleague; interview date: 17.12.2023.

<sup>208</sup> Nikolai Shaburov, historian, Losev’s secretary and listener of Averintsev’s lectures; interview date: 09.01.2024.

<sup>209</sup> ‘For some reason, Aza Alibekovna didn’t want me to be his secretary. She would say: “Volodia, why would you need this? You are a completely different person. What got into your head?”’ Vladimir Zhdanov, slavist, Losev’s assistant, interview date: 08.03.2024.

<sup>210</sup> Bibikhin, *Aleksei Fedorovich Losev. Sergei Sergeevich Averintsev*, 33.

<sup>211</sup> ‘If someone in the future retain interest in these texts and want to read about it, they will certainly compare what Aza Alibekovna wrote with what Aleksei Fedorovich dictated. Because she had a completely independent line of thought, which she skilfully hid somehow, covered with something, giving everything to Losev.’ Gasan Gusejnov, philologist, Losev’s secretary and Averintsev’s colleague; interview date: 17.12.2023.

<sup>212</sup> ‘I am afraid that the shortcomings that can be found in Losev largely come from his wife Aza Alibekovna Takho-Godi. Of course, she was Aleksei Fedorovich’s assistant for many years, his secretary, and also his co-author, I am afraid. All of Losev’s last articles and writings exist only in Takho-Godi’s record.’ Shestakov, *Pod”emy i padeniia intellektualizma v Rossii*, 83.

<sup>213</sup> In 2023, 18th conference was held. See a list of these and other publications dedicated to Losev on the website of the ‘Losev House’ Library: “Konferentsii,” *Ves’ Losev*, accessed June 13, 2024, <http://losev.domloseva.ru/vokrug-loseva/konferencii/>.

*History of Ancient Aesthetics*, whose last eighth volume saw the light of day in two parts in 1992 and 1994,<sup>214</sup> and published a collection of works in nine volumes.<sup>215</sup> Viktor Troitskii, one of the active participants of these projects, told me about these projects:

It so happened that the creation of the House coincided with the end of Losev's publishing boom. It was already absolutely evident that Losev was a prominent figure. It is one thing to simply say 'Losev,' and a whole other thing when you are presented with a huge number of volumes of different editions. And then everyone understands — yes, this is a figure.<sup>216</sup>

Thus, the publication of Losev's works organised by Takho-Godi in the 1990s increased his symbolic weight and supported institution-building. On the one hand, his books appeared as part of the wave of interest in the 'returned' legacy of previously banned Russian religious philosophers: in 1988, a two-volume edition of Vladimir Solov'ev's works was published; in 1989–1991, Nikolai Berdiaev's collection of works; and in 1994–1998, Pavel Florenskii's collection of works. On the other hand, these hefty volumes became proof of Losev's cultural significance, even for bureaucrats who were not particularly interested in philosophy.

At the same time, Takho-Godi created canonical interpretations of Losev's life and philosophy, wrote numerous articles herself, and edited collections of research and memoir texts.<sup>217</sup> In 1997, her biography *Losev* was published in the most famous Russian series of biographies, *The Lives of Remarkable People [Zhizn' zamechatel'nykh liudei]*.<sup>218</sup> Takho-Godi

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<sup>214</sup> Aleksei Losev, *Istoriia antichnoi estetiki*, 8 vols. (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1963–1994).

<sup>215</sup> Aleksei Losev, *Sobranie sochinenii*, 9 vols. (Moscow: Mysl', 1993–2002).

<sup>216</sup> Viktor Troitskii, Losev scholar, member of Losev's *kruzhok*; interview date: 01.03.2024.

<sup>217</sup> The most important collections are: Aza Takho-Godi and Elena Takho-Godi, eds., *Aleksei Fedorovich Losev* (Moscow: Rossiiskaia politicheskaiia entsiklopediia (ROSSPEN), 2009); Takho-Godi and Troitskii, *Aleksei Fedorovich Losev : iz tvorcheskogo naslediiia : sovremenniki o myslitele*.

<sup>218</sup> This biographical series played an important role in cementing the cultural significance of prominent figures in Russian history, see: Carol Ueland and Ludmilla A. Trigos, eds., *Literary Biographies in The Lives of Remarkable People Series in Russia: Biography for the Masses*, Crosscurrents (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2022).

sought here to present Losev as a ‘great Russian philosopher’ and to include him in the new intellectual canon that had been taking shape since the late 1980s, which witnessed a growing interest in the texts of Russian religious philosophers and an inflation of the professional achievements of Soviet ones. I will return to the canonisation strategy that she used in the next section.

Thus, Takho-Godi played a key role in institutionalising Losev’s charisma and shaping stable symbolic structures: his cult and canon. As I have shown, Losev’s strategy was complex and eclectic, built on bringing together heterogeneous ideas (or people) around a single centre, and it always avoided final certainty, leaving room even for strikingly opposing interpretations. Takho-Godi, by contrast, introduced a sense of certainty and order. Just as she selected people worthy of seeing or working with Losev, she selected memoir or research narratives about him for publication.

The members of the *kruzhok* seem to have sensed this contrast. For instance, Vladimir Bibikhin recorded his conversation with Sergei Averintsev in September 1988, observing that:

He started talking about Losev again when we circled around Lubyanka. I said that Aza Alibekovna established some kind of canonical version. ‘Cosima,’ he said amiably, ‘in such cases, Natasha says: we need to call Glasenapp.’ He then talked about how hard it was to learn something truthful about Wagner...<sup>219</sup>

Just a few months after Losev’s death, Bibikhin observed that Takho-Godi was establishing the canon, with which Averintsev obviously agreed, comparing Losev to Wagner (whom the former was known to have loved very much) and Takho-Godi, to his second wife, Cosima Wagner, a conservative keeper of the composer’s legacy and a talented administrator who made the Bayreuth Festival profitable. It seems an apt comparison as both these ‘genius’

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<sup>219</sup> Bibikhin, *Aleksei Fedorovich Losev. Sergei Sergeevich Averintsev*, 370–371. Carl Friedrich Glasenapp, the author of Wagner’s six-volume biography.

wives became exceptionally successful in the institutionalisation and right-wing interpretation of their husbands' legacy.

Aza Takho-Godi accepted the role of the 'great philosopher's' wife as a spiritual service; she sacrificed herself for his work, but at the same time, she gained social and administrative power by becoming his first apostle, the keeper of his legacy, and the creator of the cult and canon. She fought fiercely (and successfully!) against Losev's 'enemies,' be they vigilant censors, historians who disagreed with his interpretation of the Renaissance, or 'traitors' of his *kruzhok*. She routinised his charisma, using both an extensive social network and academic structures. Unlike Losev, who left room for reinterpretation of his words, Takho-Godi managed to inscribe her version of Losev into the Russian intellectual canon. While remaining in the shadow of Losev's figure, she determined to a very large extent what that figure looked like for posterity.

### **Inheriting Charisma: The Secretaries**

Losev's secretaries were another very important part of his *kruzhok* and his legacy-building. It was they who were engaged in collective work — reading aloud, translating, taking dictation, preparing manuscripts for publication and commenting — without which both writing and publication of Losev's texts would have been impossible. They also participated in symbolic production, i.e. in the creation and promotion of Losev's cult in the Russian intellectual field. They became Losev's disciples, absorbing his intellectual techniques to some extent, but also experiencing the formative impact of his charisma on their identity. In some cases, they even claimed to have inherited this charisma to advance their academic careers.

As already noted, in the 1960s–1980s, many very different people gathered around Losev. Among them were established academics: philosophers Mikhail Ovsiannikov, Aleksandr Spirkin, Vasilii Sokolov, Piama Gaidenko, sociologist Iurii Davydov, literary scholar Piotr

Palievskii, and others. Their personal relations with Losev could be closer<sup>220</sup> than those of secretaries, who came to work with Losev and were separated from him by a tremendous age and status gap. However, these academics were not Losev's disciples — they could be friends or allies but were also established professionals and ‘always had their own opinions.’<sup>221</sup> They did not participate in collective work on a regular basis and did not identify themselves as Losev’s disciples (Losevites or *losevtsy*).

My decision to focus specifically on secretaries was also influenced by the fact that many of them were, fortunately, still alive in 2023–2024, so I could interview them. I received several refusals, but still managed to secure three interviews with former Losev’s secretaries: 1) philologist Gasan Gusejnov, who worked with Losev from 1974 to 1988; 2) historian Nikolai Shaburov, who worked with Losev for two short periods, in the summer of 1979 and in the mid-1980s; and 3) philosopher and translator Igor’ Makhan’kov, who worked as a secretary from 1982 to 1988 and in the early 2000s became the first director of the ‘Losev House’ Library, but then, in Aza Takho-Godi words, ‘betrayed Losev’s cause.’<sup>222</sup> Their testimonies revealed how their work with Losev was organised, and also how some of them tried to inherit Losev’s charisma in different ways.

A person became a secretary on the recommendation of a member of the *kruzhok*: Gasan Gusejnov was invited by Aza Takho-Godi herself, his supervisor at the MSU Faculty of Philology (‘it was a great honour and the most important recognition for me,’ he said<sup>223</sup>);

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<sup>220</sup> In Takho-Godi’s memoirs friendly relations are rarely described in detail. When they are described, though, the portraits of friends are usually limited to some curious characteristics which spark the author’s nostalgia. See, for example: ‘There were permanent, regular guests at the dacha, no summer went without them, from the early 70s to Aleksei’s Fedorovich’s death. These were our friends, professors M.F. Ovsiannikov and V. V. Sokolov. Both friends came with important tasks. Mikhail Fedotovitch, with a Japanese camera, to shoot Aleksei Fedorovich and everyone around him, including his dogs, in different settings. Vasilii Vasil’evich, with the discussion of editorial business, new ideas, and accounts of Moscow events. His awareness was exceptional, and he always surprised us with his ability to tell the exact date of birth and death and the years of publication — he was a living chronicle of events, very old and recent.’ Takho-Godi, *Losev*, 374.

<sup>221</sup> Ibid, 335.

<sup>222</sup> Ibid, 437.

<sup>223</sup> Gasan Gusejnov, philologist, Losev’s secretary and Averintsev’s colleague; interview date: 17.12.2023.

Nikolai Shaburov was asked by his groupmate at the university and another secretary, historian Aleksandr Stol'iarov,<sup>224</sup> to take over for a period of his vacation; and Igor' Makhan'kov was invited by a former student of Takho-Godi, philologist Ol'ga Smyka.<sup>225</sup> They needed to know foreign languages: Ancient Greek and Latin, but also at least one or two European languages (English, German, French or Italian). Although the most talented and interested postgraduate students were selected to work as secretaries, they worked with Losev on topics other than those of their theses. Gasan Gusejnov believes this arose out of the desire to avoid 'conflict of interest:'

Aleksei Fedorovich revised the [textual] works that we did for him and included them in his books. Both he and Aza Alibekovna did not want students' works to somehow determine the course of his thought or interfere with it.<sup>226</sup>

The secretaries would come to Losev's flat at Arbat street, 33, or, in summer, to Aleksandr Spirkin's dacha,<sup>227</sup> where on fine days, they would work in the fresh air, sitting under maple trees. Working days were split between secretaries; for example, Igor' Makhan'kov usually came three days per week,<sup>228</sup> and Gasan Gusejnov, who worked for free, was assigned one day.<sup>229</sup> They would arrive around noon (Losev, tormented by insomnia, got up late) and work for 5–6 hours. They would summarise or read the required texts for Losev, sometimes translating texts on sight, and transcribe dictation. Gasan Gusejnov describes the working environment as follows:

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<sup>224</sup> Nikolai Shaburov, historian, Losev's secretary and listener of Averintsev's lectures; interview date: 09.01.2024.

<sup>225</sup> Igor' Makhan'kov, translator, Losev's secretary, interview date: 04.02.2024.

<sup>226</sup> Gasan Gusejnov, philologist, Losev's secretary and Averintsev's colleague; interview date: 17.12.2023.

<sup>227</sup> Aza Takho-Godi describes the dacha as a special 'world where so much was thought and written [...] when phones did not disturb, people did not come, and errand did not distract.' She also lists those who worked as secretaries: Vladimir Bibikhin, Aleksandr Stol'iarov, Iurii Shichalin, Gasan Gusejnov, Nadezhda Malinauskene, and others. Takho-Godi, *Losev*, 364–365. Vladimir Zhdanov told me in the interview that Losev helped Spirkin buy his dacha. Vladimir Zhdanov, slavist, Losev's assistant, interview date: 08.03.2024.

<sup>228</sup> Igor' Makhan'kov, translator, Losev's secretary, interview date: 04.02.2024.

<sup>229</sup> Gasan Gusejnov, philologist, Losev's secretary and Averintsev's colleague; interview date: 17.12.2023.

We would sit in his study. He would sit at a huge table full of books. All this would happen in semi-darkness. Above our heads hung a Chizhevskii chandelier, a special device that ionised the air. I had a large notebook or some paper, so-called scratch paper, that is sheets where old texts were crossed out, and I wrote by hand on the blank side. He would dictate, then ask me to read him what I had written. Or I would tell him something, and he would immediately say, 'Keep this one, it's important.' [...] It was a kind of, so to speak, first-hand presence at the creation of thought, of the text.<sup>230</sup>

Apparently, the setting remained very stable, as this description corresponds exactly to the footage shot in the last year of his life for the documentary film 'Losev.'<sup>231</sup> About halfway through the film, there is a working scene: Losev is sitting in an armchair, his secretary, Igor' Makhan'kov, is leafing through a manuscript on the other side of a huge table piled with books, and then Aza Takho-Godi approaches the table to say something.

Sometimes after finishing their work, Losev and his secretaries would drink tea and talk. Gusejnov recalls that Losev was interested in both intellectual and personal subjects (Bibikhin's memoirs leave the same impression): he might engage in folk etymology, connecting, for example, the words *homo* and *humus*, or talk about the starry sky, Friedrich Nietzsche or Vladimir Solov'ev, but would also ask about the personal lives of Aza Takho-Godi's students.<sup>232</sup> However, Losev treated different secretaries in different ways: Igor' Makhan'kov told me that he was a man of few words,<sup>233</sup> and Aleksandr Stol'iarov also characterised him as someone 'a bit aloof, deep into himself [...] [who] basically wanted only one thing: to be left alone.'<sup>234</sup> Conversely, Vladimir Bibikhin cites conversations that show that Losev sometimes spoke very passionately and offered quite sharp and emotional

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<sup>230</sup> Gasan Gusejnov, philologist, Losev's secretary and Averintsev's colleague; interview date: 17.12.2023.

<sup>231</sup> *Losev*, directed by Viktor Kossakovskii, 1989, 56:23, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ufQILYY4Jq4>.

<sup>232</sup> Gasan Gusejnov, philologist, Losev's secretary and Averintsev's colleague; interview date: 17.12.2023.

<sup>233</sup> Igor' Makhan'kov, translator, Losev's secretary, interview date: 04.02.2024.

<sup>234</sup> Stol'iarov and Kusenko, "Aleksandr Stol'iarov: «Otvechu Vam sovershenno chestno»,» 240.

characterisations of Russian and Soviet intellectuals (Bibikhin seems to have been particularly interested in these characteristics and wrote them down in detail<sup>235</sup>). Of course, such conversations required much more intimacy and more trust in the interlocutor.

Bibikhin's entries also reveal how this trust was gradually built up. For example, Losev told Bibikhin that he considered him 'the most knowledgeable' of those who worked on the edition of Plato's works ('Mysl' Publishing House, 1968–1972)<sup>236</sup> or stated that they shared certain knowledge beyond Aza Takho-Godi's comprehension:

14.4.1973. Aza Alibekovna: 'Volodia [Bibikhin] rushes from side to side like Aleksei Fedorovich.' A.F. [Losev]: 'Listen, Volodia (brightening), they don't realise that it's the same thing. Aza doesn't realise that linguistics, Nicholas of Cusa, and Diogenes Laertius — it's all the same thing.'<sup>237</sup>

Gasán Gusejnov laughed when, commenting on Bibikhin's account of Losev sharing an exceptionally deep understanding of philosophical matters only with his secretary:

I read this too. You see, he [Bibikhin] is such a naive person. I would take it with a pinch of salt because Aleksei Fedorovich used to say this [that the secretary he was speaking to understood him better than anyone else] absolutely to all his students, all his secretaries. If he trusted a person, he might not have said it, but if he had some apprehension, some slight distrust — he would always say it. I remember when he stopped saying it — and I assumed that he started to fully trust me. You see, he

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<sup>235</sup> See, for example: 'Mamardashvili is worse than a spy. I know why he objected to the symbol; it was all reported to me. It's all plain and simple to me. By the way, he himself has now been kicked out of *Voprosy Filosofii*. To this day, I still thank God that I was able to say a living word even in the mouth of the beast where there are phone calls from the Central Committee every day. Because no Dynnik, no Asmus could do that for they are opportunists. Dynnik was busy proving that he was not a socialist revolutionary and then, after he was elected to the Academy [of Sciences of the USSR], blasphemed God and made philological mistakes. Asmus is more decent and closer to the sources, but he has such a lacquered, elaborate style that, of course, he ruined his knowledge and everything. He turned out to be an average publicist.' Bibikhin, *Aleksei Fedorovich Losev. Sergei Sergeevich Averintsev*, 239.

<sup>236</sup> Ibid, 99.

<sup>237</sup> Ibid, 180.

depended on your integrity: did you translate everything, or is it really what this author says? He had to trust you [because, being almost blind, Losev could not work with texts on his own]. [...] That's why I found this 'only you and I understand' very funny. I later discussed with Iurii Shichalin — [it was] the same thing. He would say this to everyone in the beginning, when he wanted to make you feel at ease. Then you would start working, and this nonsense didn't arise anymore.<sup>238</sup>

Thus, in conversations with his secretaries, Losev used the same complex communicative tactics I have described earlier, varying the intensity of communication, the emotionality of his statements and the degree of sincerity depending on the interlocutor. He tried to build a relationship of trust with at least some of his secretaries. The importance of these personal relationships in his circle can be clearly seen in the highly emotional descriptions of severing ties with 'traitors' (I discuss one such case below).

Social events played a significant role in building these personal relationships. In the evenings, after his secretary departed, Losev would rest and then receive guests or return to intellectual work. Igor' Makhan'kov says that his thought process did not stop for a very long time, and he would think from the evening about what he was going to dictate the next day.<sup>239</sup> Vladimir Bibikhin observes broadly the same.<sup>240</sup> His assistant, Vladimir Zhdanov, recounts receiving guests at Losev's house:

There was once an old Russian tradition — Russian professors organised Sunday dinners for their students. And Aleksei Fedorovich continued this tradition. He had

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<sup>238</sup> Gasan Gusejnov, philologist, Losev's secretary and Averintsev's colleague; interview date: 17.12.2023.

<sup>239</sup> Igor' Makhan'kov, translator, Losev's secretary, interview date: 04.02.2024.

<sup>240</sup> 'I try to work less. But the thoughts keep me awake. I can't sleep with this pressure that has been in my brain and my soul for my whole life. I think about it, add something, and the best thoughts come at night. I am stuck. Usually, old people have a norm and a routine established, and I don't. Well, I have a routine: read and write, but that's it. And it's all buzzing; new ideas constantly emerge. I can go to bed at midnight and at three am. When guests come, the conversation goes until one or two in the morning.' Bibikhin, *Aleksei Fedorovich Losev. Sergei Sergeevich Averintsev*, 248.

dinners at his house on Sundays. [...] And very interesting people came to these dinners.<sup>241</sup>

It is striking, that, according to him, Losev almost never invited secretaries to these dinners. Zhdanov recalls that the guests included both members of the circle and more or less random people; perhaps Losev was seeking to broaden his network. He names, for example, the structuralist linguist Sebastian Shaumian, the philosopher Leonid Stolovich, and even Zhdanov's Caucasian friends, 'ordinary guys,' not connected to academia, with whom Losev talked because 'it was important for him to feel the pulse of life.'<sup>242</sup> Aza Takho-Godi wrote proudly about the way that guests were received: 'We knew how to receive guests generously. Losev's house was famous for its hospitality.'<sup>243</sup> These social gatherings were important because they allowed him to establish useful contacts and demonstrate his broad recognition as an intellectual authority. In the 1990s, when Takho-Godi wrote his biography, the most relevant was non-Soviet recognition by descendants of pre-revolutionary intellectuals<sup>244</sup> or foreigners.<sup>245</sup> For this reason, she gave much more detail about the visit of George Kline, an American professor of Russian philosophy,<sup>246</sup> than, for example, about the 1983 visit of the USSR Minister of Education Mikhail Prokofiev who presented Losev with the Order of the Red Banner of Labour.<sup>247</sup>

By contrast, secretaries gathered only a few times a year, and on particular occasions — for example, when Losev moved to the dacha for the summer or came back to Moscow, or for

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<sup>241</sup> Vladimir Zhdanov, slavist, Losev's assistant, interview date: 08.03.2024.

<sup>242</sup> Vladimir Zhdanov, slavist, Losev's assistant, interview date: 08.03.2024.

<sup>243</sup> Takho-Godi, *Losev*, 379.

<sup>244</sup> See, for example, correspondence with Tat'iana Rozanova, the daughter of philosopher Vasilii Rozanov, and Valeriia Prishvina, the spouse of writer Mikhail Prishvin: Takho-Godi and Troitskii, *Aleksei Fedorovich Losev : iz tvorcheskogo nasledii : sovremenniki o myslitele*, 656–661.

<sup>245</sup> As Barbara Walker observes, dissidents also deemed important the recognition from Western journalists, diplomats, and scholars and their participation in human rights campaigns. See: Walker, "Pollution and Purification in the Moscow Human Rights Networks of the 1960s and 1970s": 385.

<sup>246</sup> Takho-Godi, *Losev*, 377–379.

<sup>247</sup> Ibid, 396.

his birthday.<sup>248</sup> My interviewees recall these moves as fun and memorable events. For example, Igor' Makhan'kov described it as follows:

Gasan Gusejnov, Sasha Stol'iarov, Iura Panasenکو took part in this... Gasan Gusejnov carried a refrigerator on his shoulders; it was assumed to be his job. Several people would put the refrigerator [on his shoulders], and he would carry it. We would order a truck with a tent, load it with stuff and ride off merrily in it. And then Aza Alibekovna would provide some small treats on the occasion of the move.<sup>249</sup>

Vladimir Zhdanov told me an anecdote about how, in 1973 or 1974, he managed to return Losev's rocking chair, stolen during the move by some employee of the publishing house, which at that time occupied the first floor of the house where Losev lived.<sup>250</sup> Thus, the moves became minor adventures when young men engaged in joint physical labour, had fun, and sometimes got a chance to shine.

It would be interesting to add female perspectives to this homosocial discourse. Unfortunately, I did not have the opportunity to talk to the female secretaries to include their stories. Those I contacted, such as Dina Magomedova, Valentina Postovalova, and Nadezhda Malinauskene, declined my interview requests. The experiences of women in

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<sup>248</sup> See, for example, Aza Takho-Godi's description of Losev's last birthday (September 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1987): 'Most importantly, everyone gathered at the dacha on the festive day, my and Aleksei Fedorovich's friends and students. A table is set up, occupying the whole veranda. As usual, Gasan and Iura — two Ajaxes, with huge watermelons; they carry an apple pie of unprecedented size, baked by Rita, Valerii Pavlovich's wife; there were fragrant melons, peaches, and pears — everyone, as usual, drinks to his health.' Ibid, 428.

<sup>249</sup> Igor' Makhan'kov, translator, Losev's secretary, interview date: 04.02.2024.

<sup>250</sup> 'Aleksei Fedorovich's favourite rocking chair, in which he always sat under maple trees, was stolen. But then, as a Caucasian man — those other guys from Moscow [were] so quiet, modest, well-mannered — I started banging on the door: "Open up!" A face sticks out, a quite intelligent one. I ask, "Did you steal the rocking chair?" "No, what rocking chair?" And then I made a speech: "Shame on you, guys! Do you know who lives above you? Losev lives above you. He is the last Russian philosopher of the Silver Age, the treasure of our land. And you stole a rocking chair from such a man!" He blushed, apologised and took the rocking chair out.

But the most interesting thing was when we told this to Aleksei Fedorovich. He laughed and said that the same thing had happened to Plato... I forgot the story now, but some brother-in-law or relative of Plato saved the day with his fists. You, he said, like Plato's relative, saved my rocking chair.' Vladimir Zhdanov, slavist, Losev's assistant, interview date: 08.03.2024.

academia are too often underrepresented, and it is regrettable that I cannot analyse this aspect in my research due to a lack of material.

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Following Losev's death, his secretaries managed his symbolic and intellectual legacy; their academic positions determined their strategies of inheriting Losev's charisma. Certainly, I am not claiming that Bibikhin's and Gusejnov's intellectual strategies completely depended on their experience of discipleship. However, they themselves deem this experience rather significant. Most relevant in this regard are their works on Losev's philosophy, which define their own intellectual positions in relation to Losev and show how both Bibikhin and Gusejnov inherited parts of Losev's legacy that fit their academic trajectories and ambitions (and also how these trajectories and ambitions were shaped by their experience of discipleship).

Vladimir Bibikhin (1938–2004) was perhaps Losev's best-known secretary. He enjoyed limited success in his academic career. In the 1970s and 1980s, he mostly engaged in non-prestigious intellectual work, including translating, editing, or referencing philosophical texts. From the late 1980s, he taught — but without a permanent position — at the Faculty of Philosophy at Moscow State University, reading several courses that were original and only loosely compliant with the overall curriculum. He became famous as a translator of philosophical and theological texts, primarily Martin Heidegger's works (Bibikhin's translation of *Being and Time* was published in 1997). His fame was not without a taint of scandal, however, as his translations would often diverge quite significantly from the original.<sup>251</sup> Bibikhin's posthumous recognition grew significantly: in the 2000s–2010s, his

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<sup>251</sup> Even the most laudatory commentators recognised it. For example, we read on the website dedicated to Bibikhin's legacy: "His translations are not only philological but also philosophical achievements. They radically revise the principles of text interpretation known to our tradition of philosophical translation." Kseniia Golubovich, "Biography," Vladimir Bibikhin, <http://www.bibikhin.ru/biography>. Naturally, critical reviews are much less sympathetic to this 'radical revision' of the norms of academic translation. See: Aleksei Appolonov, "Bibikhin: kak rubit' iazykom splecha?," *Pushkin*, no. 1 (2008).

lectures were published, and his works drew the attention of scholars.<sup>252</sup> His reputation as a prominent philosopher was further solidified by the high praise from other prestigious intellectuals, such as Olga Sedakova<sup>253</sup> and Oleg Kharkhordin.<sup>254</sup>

Bibikhin was Losev's student and secretary, at first 'fascinated' and convinced of his teacher's infallibility,<sup>255</sup> but later, in the mid-1980s, increasingly critical. In a note in January 1985, he wrote about his 'break' with Losev and his resentment of Losev's conformism. Bibikhin then cited his letter to Losev and Takho-Godi, in which he commented on an interview with Losev published in the main Soviet newspaper *Pravda*:<sup>256</sup>

I haven't seen this issue of *Pravda* with Aleksei Fedorovich's interview before, but I have heard a lot of talk. Of course, instead of Lunacharskii, one could have called Fedor Stepun a 'remarkable lecturer,' and instead of 'the insane extremes of bourgeois-capitalist civilisation,' one could have simply said 'technical civilisation' — the censorship would have allowed it. The 'materialist understanding of history' and 'class enemy' are also just an extra boon to savour for the guard dogs; best not give them more to eat, as they have already eaten their fill. But in general, for the first time, a strong and cheerful word from a vigorous mind could be heard in a newspaper with millions of readers.<sup>257</sup>

Here, Bibikhin criticised Losev's alliance with Marxism as no longer necessary in the mid-1980s, apparently assuming that, as the Soviet regime was collapsing, one could finally

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<sup>252</sup> An issue of the bilingual (Russian and English) journal *Stasis* is particularly noteworthy. See: *Stasis* №1, 2015: Vladimir Bibikhin and his Thought, <https://stasisjournal.net/index.php/journal/issue/view/5>

<sup>253</sup> Olga Sedakova, "O Vladimire Veniaminoviche Bibikhine," Olga Sedakova, accessed June 13, 2024, <http://www.olgasedakova.com/Moralia/300>.

<sup>254</sup> Oleg Kharkhordin, "Chto takoe sobstvennost'?", *Forbes.ru*, May 2, 2009, <https://www.forbes.ru/forbes/issue/2009-05/6939-chto-takoe-sobstvennost>.

<sup>255</sup> Bibikhin, *Aleksei Fedorovich Losev. Sergei Sergeevich Averintsev*, 12.

<sup>256</sup> Aleksei Losev, "Derzanie dukha: Razgovor s interesnym sobesednikom / besedu veli N. Mishina, IU. Rostovtsev," *Pravda*, January 17, 1985.

<sup>257</sup> Bibikhin, *Aleksei Fedorovich Losev. Sergei Sergeevich Averintsev*, 293–294.

abandon official Marxist language. His notes show that he did not talk much to Losev after that. Still, he remained a member of the *kruzhok*, meaning that he attended Losev's funeral and took part in some events organised by Takho-Godi,<sup>258</sup> despite his scepticism towards her strategy of canonisation.

Bibikhin understood perfectly well that his notes did not fit into this strategy. Shortly before his death, he wrote: 'I can pass for a faithful one as long as I don't publish my notes.'<sup>259</sup> One of my interviewees, close to Takho-Godi, recounted that by publishing them, Bibikhin violated the agreement that he had with her:

Unfortunately, he initially put forward a project of a twofold book: Aza Alibekovna's and his. [...] He wanted to collect his notes for Aza Alibekovna to write her comments to them. And he did bring them. [...] Aza Alibekovna began to write, to comment — because there were inaccuracies, small but significant: misprints in surnames, certain mistakes. [...] She wrote about 50 pages by hand. But the thing is that he had cancer and, apparently, realised that it would take a long time, that he would not live to see the publication of this book. And without warning Aza Alibekovna, he prepared this edition. And the last time I saw him was when he brought [this book] to Aza Alibekovna's name day with the inscription: 'To Aza Alibekovna in hope of understanding,' or something like that. But he didn't even dare to come in, just handed me the book at the doorstep.<sup>260</sup>

The fact that Bibikhin broke, at least partially, with Losev and then sought to present an image of him, alternative to that created by Aza Takho-Godi, points to his own philosophical ambitions: apparently, the role of a faithful disciple and follower was no longer sufficient for him. From the late 1980s to the early 1990s, he started to assert himself as an original thinker with a claim to the highest philosophical recognition. Like Heidegger, to whom Bibikhin

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<sup>258</sup> Ibid, 299–302.

<sup>259</sup> Ibid, 302.

<sup>260</sup> Anonymous, philologist, member of Losev's *kruzhok*; interview date: 25.01.2024.

directly compared him,<sup>261</sup> Losev became one of the main sources of inspiration for Bibikhin's independent work. His philosophical strategy deserves a separate study; here, I focus only on one important aspect of it — the inheritance of Losev's charisma and specifically, Bibikhin's adoption of Losev's style of self-presentation.

Firstly, as it becomes evident from his correspondence with the famous poet Olga Sedakova, Bibikhin was deeply concerned by the lack of recognition in the 1990s: he repeatedly complained about the instability of his position at Moscow State University,<sup>262</sup> worried about negative critical responses to his translation of *Being and Time*,<sup>263</sup> and admitted that he envied his colleagues.<sup>264</sup> Such reactions are very similar to Losev's emotions that Bibikhin recorded so assiduously: the weight of unrealised ambitions,<sup>265</sup> jealousy of Averintsev,<sup>266</sup> as well as the lament that 'disciples come to Losev when they have nowhere else to go, and then leave him.'<sup>267</sup> It seems that Bibikhin interiorised and reproduced this emotional pattern,

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<sup>261</sup> Bibikhin, *Aleksei Fedorovich Losev. Sergei Sergeevich Averintsev*, 297.

<sup>262</sup> For example, see: letter on 21–22.7.1994. Vladimir Bibikhin and Olga Sedakova, "Vladimir Veniaminovich Bibikhin — Ol'ga Aleksandrovna Sedakova. Perepiska 1992–2004. Chast' pervaiia (1992–1995)," *Gefter*, 2014, <https://gefter.ru/archive/13476>.

<sup>263</sup> See: letter on 22.6.1997. Vladimir Bibikhin and Olga Sedakova, "Vladimir Veniaminovich Bibikhin — Ol'ga Aleksandrovna Sedakova. Perepiska 1992–2004. Chast' vtoraiia (1996–1999)," *Gefter*, 2014, <https://gefter.ru/archive/13776>.

<sup>264</sup> 'Averintsev, Ivanov, Zalizniak, and now even partly Horuzhii, who made their way in life, push me back. I am a little afraid that your fame will result in something of the sort, and what joy it will be to see every time that my fears are in vain. But who knows...' Letter on 27.8.1998. Bibikhin and Sedakova, "Vladimir Veniaminovich Bibikhin — Ol'ga Aleksandrovna Sedakova. Perepiska 1992–2004. Chast' vtoraiia (1996–1999)."

<sup>265</sup> Bibikhin repeatedly recorded, over the years, Losev's complaints that his books and articles were not published and that his ideas were not understood by colleagues and editors. For example, he wrote down their conversation in great detail in an entry dated 30 May 1975, in which Losev lamented that his works were not being published, insisted that this was a consequence of the clarity of his thought (unlike Averintsev's), and expressed pride in his intellectual achievements ('Well, who can speak about Plato and Aristotle like I do? It is because I have thought this all through'). Bibikhin, *Aleksei Fedorovich Losev. Sergei Sergeevich Averintsev*, 235–240.

<sup>266</sup> 'The essence of Averintsev's theory and mine is similar, but when it comes to public and political activity, he is [Feodor] Chaliapin and I am a teacher of Greek.' *Ibid*, 174.

<sup>267</sup> *Ibid*, 246.

i.e. he inherited the emotional repertoire of the great philosopher who was not quite understood or appreciated, and was deprived of the recognition befitting him.

Secondly, Bibikhin translated Losev's communicative style into a theoretical form and turned it into his philosophical strategy. As I have shown, Losev sought to balance between different groups of his friends, disciples, and admirers, exercising caution and avoiding unambiguous definitions. This communication style corresponded to the structure of his cultural theory, which combined Marxism and Russian religious philosophy, dialectics and physiognomy. However, in each specific research case, be it the analysis of aesthetic concepts or the description of a historical epoch, Losev strove to formulate the main principle in a laconic formula which could encapsulate the phenomenon in question. The central role of this main principle, which served as a cornerstone of the whole conceptual structure, corresponded to Losev's own central position within the *kruzhok*. Conversely, Vladimir Bibikhin inherited Losev's evasive and ironic style of communication and turned it into his method of conceptual work. Unlike Losev, Bibikhin refused to settle on any stable formula, always questioning any interim conclusions. Olga Sedakova aptly summarises his approach as follows: 'If Bibikhin has any postulates, it is the postulate of bewilderment and the postulate of escape; his speech never reaches the point where it can be grasped, made into a formula and then successfully "applied."' <sup>268</sup> Other researchers and commentators describe Bibikhin's philosophy in similar terms. <sup>269</sup>

Bibikhin himself describes his position in his article 'The Absolute Myth of Aleksei Losev' [*Absoliutnyi mif A.F. Loseva*, 1994], which allows us to trace how a former disciple, who went from adoration to a partial break with his master, read Losev, following his thought and

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<sup>268</sup> Sedakova, "O Vladimire Veniaminoviche Bibikhine."

<sup>269</sup> For example: Sergei Khoruzhii, "Vkhodia v mir Bibikhina," *Istoriko-filosofskii ezhegodnik*, 2005, 121; Aleksandr Mikhailovskii, "Ontologicheskaiia germenevtika Vladimira Bibikhina," *Stasis* 3, no. 1 (2015), 306; Mikhail Bogatov, "«Pochemu Bibikhin — ne Khaidegger?»." (O kontrapunktakh i sinkopakh russkoi filosofskoi polifonii)," *Gefter*, 2018, <https://gefter.ru/archive/24972>.

interpreting it.<sup>270</sup> The first steps of this interpretative quest elevate the reader and separate him from the philistines [*obyvateli*]:

[we] have reached the pure idea and have not remained at the level of Ivan Ivanovich and Ivan Petrovich, who have it much worse: they are seeing things and do not understand why they see them and for what, because the philistines are all about dark corners and pointless swarming.<sup>271</sup>

Then, the reader finds himself surrounded by the ‘strange landscape’ of Losev’s theory where:

apparently quite familiar objects are arranged: here is Hegel with his unstoppable machinery of unfolding concepts; here is Husserl with his intentionality; here is the explicit Plotinus with the meonic matter [nothingness having the potential to transform into matter] — and they all were accepted wholesale into ‘Orthodox energetism;’ and here is the explicit Gregory Palamas; here is Christian theology; here is linguistics and Alexander Potebnja with his ‘word is a thing.’ [...] All this, we feel, is clearly not a storehouse of props and was not brought together by chance; the director clearly has a strong will.<sup>272</sup>

Bibikhin points to the distinctive characteristic of Losev’s philosophical work that I have highlighted in his late texts: an eclectic intellectual strategy weaving heterogeneous elements together. His choice of words is very revealing: this weaving is accomplished by the ‘will of the director:’ not theoretically but charismatically.

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<sup>270</sup> In this case, *Philosophy of Name* [*Filosofia imeni*, 1927].

<sup>271</sup> Vladimir Bibikhin, “Absoliutnyi mif A. F. Loseva,” *Nachala*, nos. 2–4 (1994), [http://www.bibikhin.ru/absolutny\\_mif](http://www.bibikhin.ru/absolutny_mif).

<sup>272</sup> Ibid.

Losev's thought, as presented by Bibikhin, carries the reader along. Half-way on this journey, however, he suspects a catch:

Losev's dialectics is too flexible and too powerful. [...] It is indeed an all-pervading force. It will connect everything, the most distant things, it will bring everything to one beginning, it will deduce everything from it. But is that what thought is for? Indeed, what is thought for? To invent, to connect, to prove? Or is it the wrong question to ask? Thought is not for any purpose — it is not a tool, even not a tool to sharpen your eyesight. Thought can be made into a tool — the dialectics — but it is not originally a tool. Originally, it is, let's say, a surprise. You cannot ask of surprise what it's for; it asks questions about everything itself: 'What is it for?'<sup>273</sup>

Here Bibikhin formulates the key point of his divergence with Losev and, at the same time, his own philosophical credo: thought cannot solve all problems, find meaning everywhere, or express everything in clear formulas; it must also go astray, come to a dead end, wander in circles, or stop in bewilderment. The radicalism of this philosophical stance breaks with more moderate and cautious forms of academic philosophy, allowing Bibikhin to establish his difference from his teacher.

However, paradoxically, this move serves not only to assert his intellectual independence but also to inherit Losev's philosophical charisma. The break with the teacher remains only partial: at the end of the article Bibikhin does detect 'the presence of an open question in everything that Losev writes.'<sup>274</sup> This open question may be difficult to see in Losev's texts, Bibikhin says, because it is 'masked by his mastery of meticulous precision' and is not visible to the 'naive reader.'<sup>275</sup> Bibikhin certainly was not a naive reader; he offers an almost esoteric — 'hidden' or 'secret' — understanding of Losev's texts, gained through personal communication. Therefore, Bibikhin presented himself as an original thinker who could have

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<sup>273</sup> Ibid.

<sup>274</sup> Ibid.

<sup>275</sup> Ibid.

‘a conversation with Losev’<sup>276</sup> on equal terms. He adopted Losev’s communicative style as his philosophical strategy, insisting that true philosophical thought always had to escape final definitions and remain open for questioning, much like Losev’s self-presentation in his *kruzhok*.

The case of another secretary, Gasan Gusejnov (b. 1953), represents the opposite type of intellectual inheritance — not of the great philosopher’s exceptionality, but of Losev’s intellectual techniques applied in more conventionally scholarly work. His academic career was much more successful and stable. He graduated from the Department of Classical Philology at Moscow State University, defended his dissertation on Aeschylus there, and then worked in the Sector of Ancient Literature at the Institute of World Literature of the Academy of Sciences. In the early 1990s, he taught at Bremen, Bonn, Düsseldorf, and other German universities. 17 years later, he returned to Russia with international connections and recognition, allowing him to occupy some highly prestigious positions in academia. In 2007, he became a professor at the Faculty of Philology at Moscow State University, and in the 2010s, he started working at the Higher School of Economics, which had a reputation of the most liberal and also the richest university in Russia at that time, where he became full professor. In the 2000s, his research interests shifted to the studies of the contemporary Russian language, particularly its political dimension;<sup>277</sup> in the 2010s, he also became a notable public intellectual in Russia. In 2019 and 2020, as the space for public discussions was shrinking, his posts on social media ignited heated debates in which he was accused of ‘Russophobia’ and ‘the justification of terrorism,’<sup>278</sup> which forced him to leave the Higher School of Economics and subsequently emigrate.

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<sup>276</sup> Ibid.

<sup>277</sup> For example: Gasan Gusejnov, *D.S.P.: sovetskie ideologemy v russkom diskurse 1990-kh* (Moskva: Tri kvadrata, 2004); Gasan Gusejnov, *Karta nashei Rodiny: ideologema mezhdru slovom i telom* (Moscow: OGI, 2005); Gasan Gusejnov, *Iazyk moi – Wrack moi: Khronika ot Romula do Leninopada* (Kiev: Laurus, 2017).

<sup>278</sup> The account of the scandal in media: “VShE otchitala professora za slova o ‘kloachnom’ russkom iazyke. Kak razivalsia konflikt,” *BBC News Russkaia sluzhba*, August 11, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/russian/news-50349171>.

Gusejnov's connection to Losev's circle weakened after he moved abroad but was never severed completely. A quarter of a century after Losev's death, he wrote a very complimentary article for the collection dedicated to Aza Takho-Godi's 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary.<sup>279</sup> In his interview with me, Gusejnov stated that Losev had had a continuous influence on him:

I saw my work with Aleksei Fedorovich as the kind of academic work that I myself was not going to imitate. Even if I had some imitations... The first little book I published was called *Plato's Dramatic Method* [*Dramaturgicheskii metod Platona*]. I dedicated it to Aleksei Fedorovich. [...] But then I moved away from that. The focus of my own academic interests shifted in another direction. Although the whole Losev school was with me all the time. I relied on it all the time.<sup>280</sup>

Indeed, the influence of 'Losev's school' can be traced throughout Gusejnov's works. While Bibikhin, who aspired to inherit the status of a great philosopher, searched for the 'hidden' meanings of Losev's texts, 'masked by his mastery of meticulous precision,' Gusejnov, who has an exemplary academic career, relied on exactly this scholarly precision. Bibikhin developed Losev's interest in 'folk etymology,' turning it into a method of Russian-language adaptation of Heidegger; conversely, Gusejnov cautiously distanced himself from any such violation of academic conventions but consistently strove for Losev-esque laconic definitions. The structure of his texts is clearly reminiscent of Losev's. For example, his book *For Office Use Only: Soviet ideologemes in the Russian Discourse of the 1990s* [*D.S.P. Sovetskii ideologemy v russkom diskurse 1990-kh*] bears distinct features of Losev's intellectual work: from schematic historical conceptualisation to the analysis of key concepts, which encapsulate the essence of the period in question.<sup>281</sup> Even the discussion of Russian obscene language [*mat*], a research subject very far from Losev's philosophy in content, is very similar to them in structure: the chapter is divided into relatively short

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<sup>279</sup> Gusejnov, "Zhizn' i sud'ba Azy Alibekovny Takho-Godi."

<sup>280</sup> Gasan Gusejnov, philologist, Losev's secretary and Averintsev's colleague; interview date: 17.12.2023.

<sup>281</sup> The book's table of content can already give an impression: Gusejnov, *D.S.P.*, 5–6.

paragraphs, each focused on a different aspect of the phenomenon in question, expressed with a short formula.

As in Bibikhin's case, Gusejnov's interpretation of Losev's philosophy reveals much about him and, in particular, about his strategy of inheriting Losev's intellectual capital. Gusejnov's analysis literally splits Losev's personality into two parts, the 'academic' one and the 'mystical' one.<sup>282</sup> He wrote that the importance of the 'mystical' part grew in the mid-1980s, when 'all sorts of obscurantism flourished in Russian society' and a motley host of admirers, from Don Cossacks to clamouring fans,' started clustering around Losev.<sup>283</sup> Gusejnov himself remained faithful to the 'academic' side of Losev, i.e. to the rational and well-argued elements of his philosophy. At the same time, based on first-hand experience, he highlighted those elements of Losev's work that aligned with his own intellectual and political views, for instance, by analysing Losev's use of Marxism as an intellectual game following the rules of Soviet philosophical discourse only to mock it. Thus, both Bibikhin and Gusejnov insisted that Losev's texts required sophisticated hermeneutics and used their intimate understanding of Losev's personality to their advantage in such hermeneutics. However, they achieved opposite results: Vladimir Bibikhin assumed the role of a great philosopher, whilst Gasan Gusejnov focused on the academic component, adopting Losev's intellectual techniques in his career of a respected scholar and public intellectual.

Finally, I will briefly discuss another case of inheriting Losev's charisma, this time in an institutionalised and materialised form. In the early 2000s, one of Losev's former secretaries, Igor' Makhan'kov (b. 1956), became the first director of the 'Losev House' Library and attempted to take real control over it from Aza Takho-Godi but failed, was declared a 'traitor,' and banished both from the library and the *kruzhok*. This story is important as it

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<sup>282</sup> Gasan Gusejnov, "Lichnost' misticheskaya i akademicheskaya: A.F. Losev o «lichnosti»," *Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie*, no. 6 (2005), <https://magazines.gorky.media/nlo/2005/6/lichnost-misticheskaya-i-akademicheskaya-a-f-losev-o-lichnosti.html>.

<sup>283</sup> Ibid.

shows how a former secretary tried to establish his independence and to use his great teacher's legacy, but not in an intellectual competition, but rather an administrative struggle.

Igor' Makhan'kov is far less known in Russian intellectual circles than Bibikhin or Gusejnov. In the 1970s, he studied in the Moscow Automobile and Road Institute but did not graduate. In 1982–88, he worked as Losev's secretary while studying at the evening department of the Faculty of Philosophy at MSU and having a part-time job as a university courier. In 1990s and 2000s, he translated and edited philosophical texts. On the recommendation of Aza Takho-Godi, Makhan'kov became the first director of the 'Losev House' Library of the History of Russian Philosophy and Culture established in 2001 as a result of many years of effort by Takho-Godi and other members of the circle.<sup>284</sup> The original plan was to open the library to the public in 2002, but it was delayed until 2004. Takho-Godi blamed Makhan'kov's 'unseemly activities,' effectively accusing him of stealing several hundred books.<sup>285</sup> One of my interviewees, close to the core of the *kruzhok*, who believes that the establishment of the library was the heyday of the circle since it brought its members together under a common cause, told me that:

Different candidates [for the director's post] were considered, but everyone already worked somewhere. There was one person who didn't work anywhere, and that was Igor' Iosifovich Makhan'kov, who was a private student of Ol'ga Viktorovna Smyka, Aza Alibekovna's student. [...] He had never worked anywhere, only part-time, did some translations and studied foreign languages, and she recommended him as a secretary to Aleksei Fedorovich. He was considered close to the house; he was one of the last secretaries. [...] Aza Alibekovna favoured him. Then he even became her confidant: when Aza Alibekovna went to the dacha, she left him the keys, and he lived in the house. He was allowed to take any books. That is, absolute trust. [...]

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<sup>284</sup> See: Takho-Godi, *Losev*, 482–487.

<sup>285</sup> *Ibid*, 487.

And so, he was proposed for the director's post to the Moscow Department of Culture. Unfortunately, it turned out that the test of position was a hard challenge. [...] It was a long and ugly story. Firstly, he turned to anthroposophical ideas and sought to establish an anthroposophical school instead of Losev's library. [...] And secondly, he just started stealing books that he had been given.<sup>286</sup>

Obviously, Makhan'kov describes this situation very differently, in his turn accusing Aza Takho-Godi of pursuing her own interests. He told me in our interview that instead of conserving Losev's memorial apartment, where 'everything should have been preserved', she had it renovated in order to live there. Then he presented his version of the conflict:

I was between two fires. Aza Alibekovna said that she would bequeath the books to the city,<sup>287</sup> but she didn't do so. As the director of the library, I was expected to facilitate the handover. And she didn't want to do it. As far as I know, she didn't give away the most valuable items. [...] I was pressured: [Department of Culture] allocates substantial sums of money for the library, and the books aren't there. I kept telling it to Aza Alibekovna, first just suggesting it and then, I guess, I might have explicitly demanded it. At this time, philosopher Arkadii Maler started working with us. Once I let it slip that I was not a Losevite [*losevtsem*], and he snitched on me to Aza. [...] It made her furious, and she decided to banish me. And started spreading rumours that I had stolen the books. She made a whole story out of it. And we parted our ways there.

Krylov [the head of the Department of Culture of the Central Administrative District of Moscow] didn't want to let me go because I was the mainstay of the library. I slept there overnight, managed the library during the day, and compiled catalogues in the evening. Krylov saw that I was enthusiastic and put in a lot of effort, and that he

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<sup>286</sup> Anonymous, philologist, member of Losev's *kruzhok*; interview date: 25.01.2024.

<sup>287</sup> 'The letter [to the Moscow Mayor Iurii Luzhkov] stated the reasons why this place where A.F. Losev lived and wrote should be turned into a library to which I bequest approximately ten thousand books from Losev's private collection.' Takho-Godi, *Losev*, 487.

wouldn't find anyone else like me, so he held on to me to the last moment. Nevertheless, of course, Aza Alibekovna defeated me, and I was transferred. [...] The fact that I was transferred first to the Turgenev library and then to the Public Political library proves that they [Moscow officials] did not believe that I had embezzled anything.<sup>288</sup>

I will not speculate about what happened to the books at the 'Losev House' Library in the early 2000s. For my purposes, it is far more important that these two stories complement each other in the descriptions of the interactions between *kruzhok* members. Firstly, close personal ties and trust played a key role in any professional relations. Makhan'kov was promoted to the director's post because he was trustworthy: he could have the keys from the apartment, and he even took part in washing Losev's body before the funeral. For Takho-Godi and other *kruzhok* members, the breaking of such ties, be it caused by mala fides (book theft) or bona fides (professional diligence), was equivalent to betrayal. My interviewee, who was close to the core of the *kruzhok*, overtly called him Judas.<sup>289</sup> Makhan'kov also claimed that in the mid-1980s, when he 'acted up' and stopped working as a secretary for half a year, Aza Takho-Godi was offended and decided that he had gone mad.<sup>290</sup> Secondly, both interviewees point out that personal loyalty had to be coupled with theoretical fealty: that is, to be able to be head of an institution named after Losev, one had to share his ideas.

Whatever the exact circumstances were, Igor' Makhan'kov's attempt to act independently and contrary to Takho-Godi's will, i.e. to take control of Losev's institutionalised charisma as the director of the library, could not be interpreted as anything other than a threat.

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<sup>288</sup> Igor' Makhan'kov, translator, Losev's secretary, interview date: 04.02.2024.

<sup>289</sup> Anonymous, philologist, member of Losev's *kruzhok*; interview date: 25.01.2024.

<sup>290</sup> Igor' Makhan'kov, translator, Losev's secretary, interview date: 04.02.2024. He also recalls these events on his website: 'I left because once again I felt driven into a rut, I felt that there was not enough time for anything, and my life was melting away. I decided that I would do something big (what – I didn't really know myself). I came back about six months later. During those six months, Aza consoled herself by telling everyone who wanted to listen to her (and there were many of them, I should think) that I had left them because I had gone mad.' There see also his account of washing Losev's body: Igor' Makhan'kov, "Dnevnik moei materi," *Vzgliad i nechto*, March 19, 2008, <https://makhankov.ucoz.ru/load/1-1-0-7>.

Makhan'kov himself spoke quite frankly about this: 'Aza Alibekovna parted badly with many people. [...] Well, partly because she realised that they could compete with her. That's why she fought.'<sup>291</sup> Her fight turned out to be exceptionally successful, as she managed to retain control over both symbolic and institutional structures for decades, such that eventually her version of Losev's image became entrenched in Russian culture, as analysed in the next section.

## The Intellectual Cult and the Process of Canonisation

Losev's philosophical canonisation in the Russian academic and broader cultural space was exceptionally successful: the cult and the canon, developed in the *kruzhok* during the late Soviet period, were extended beyond it by his disciples and followers and inscribed into new post-Soviet intellectual hierarchies. They put impressive effort into publishing his writings, creating memorial and research institutions, and promoting his image as a great philosopher who preserved the tradition of Russian religious philosophy and Orthodox spirituality for posterity.

The documentary *Losev*, filmed by Viktor Kossakovskii in 1987–1988, captures the specific forms of his veneration as a philosopher and a spiritual Teacher. The black-and-white film shows several moments from the last year of Losev's life, and his funeral. At first, the film situates Losev within his *kruzhok*: one of its female members takes care of him, bringing him tea, while he tells her, coughing, that he especially likes her because 'she knows well how to suffer' and 'she has her own spiritual life and not just a physical trifle.'<sup>292</sup> The film places Losev among the philosophers of the Silver Age: he talks about his short acquaintance with some of them in the mid-1910s while portraits of Nikolai Berdiaev, Vladimir Solov'ev, Pavel Florenskii and others appear on the screen. Then, the viewer sees Losev entering the Pedagogical Institute, receiving a state award, and working in his study at a big desk piled high with books, helped by Aza Takho-Godi and Igor' Makhan'kov. The second half of the film

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<sup>291</sup> Igor' Makhan'kov, translator, Losev's secretary, interview date: 04.02.2024.

<sup>292</sup> Kossakovskii, Viktor, dir. Losev. 1989. 56:23. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ufQILYY4Jq4>.

shows Losev's funeral. Shot in a single take, the farewell scene lasts over nine minutes: a long line of people approaches the coffin, crossing themselves and kissing Losev. It is followed by Losev's ruminations about life, fate, and death (which is 'the sign of God's love') — his passing seems to render them even more significant. The film ends with another long shot of the burial of the coffin.

The director of the film, Viktor Kossakovskii, retrospectively explained that the specific visuals of the film were as much the result of technical limitations (shortages of film stock and Losev's reluctance to be filmed) as of the creative ideas of the twenty-four-year-old aspiring director, who sensed that he had a unique opportunity to film a great thinker.<sup>293</sup> Kossakovskii insisted that, with his camera, he was able to capture what people could not see, and described Losev as a teacher of wisdom who could answer 'the Karamazovian' questions' about the meaning of life and death. His account not only adds detail to the group portrait of the *kruzhok* (for example, to obtain Losev's permission to film, he had to convince Takho-Godi first, which he managed to do by bringing her some halva), but also demonstrates that Losev's funeral was experienced as a historical moment:

These ten minutes of farewell. [...] [The viewer] could enter there, be there, stand there for a while... Why did I film this? I started shooting — I didn't have any film stock, and every minute was priceless to me, every second was priceless. I had to stop [filming], but I couldn't stop. I realised that I witnessed something historic. Even more than history — something genuine that would become priceless later. [...] You see how people — excuse me for saying this — don't know how to cross themselves, don't know how to approach the coffin, they are afraid to approach the coffin.<sup>294</sup>

Kossakovskii assumed that the awkwardness — or, rather, the inconsistency — in the performance of the rite stemmed from a lack of familiarity with Orthodox ritual practices in

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<sup>293</sup> 181211 Rezhisser Viktor Kossakovskii. *O s'emkakh fil'ma «LOSEV»*, directed by Viktor Kossakovskii, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mbGISQRv2L4>.

<sup>294</sup> Ibid.

1988. However, I argue that such inconsistency could also be interpreted as a sign of the process of Losev's canonisation and the development of his cult taking place at that moment. The farewell ceremony indeed looks strange — not because people 'do not know how to cross themselves,' but because they behave excessively, lowering their heads, kneeling, touching the ground or the coffin with their foreheads, and kissing the body multiple times. They touch Losev's body not as the remains of a friend or a teacher, but rather as the relics of a saint, a material vessel of his charisma.

Losev's funeral and subsequent anniversaries of his death became key milestones in the formation of his cult and ensured the *kruzhok's* cohesion after its leader's death.<sup>295</sup> Viktor Troitskii, a fellow of the 'Losev House' Library and Aza Takho-Godi's closest associate, told me that:

Firstly, the most [important] commemorative event is, of course, our invariable meetings on the day of Losev's passing, May 24<sup>th</sup>. By Providence, so to speak, it coincided with [...] the day of Slavic Writing and Culture. [...] We never forget about this important roll call. There is an assembly at Vagan'kovskoe cemetery: people come, and priests perform the requiem service, a long, extended, thorough one, with singers.

[Secondly,] with the effort of our society 'Losev Conversations' we established 'Losev House', that is, there is a library-museum now, on the floors above and below the flat where Losev's family used to live. And, naturally, all commemorative events are held in this house. There is a museum, an exhibition about Losev and his times, and there is also a monument in the courtyard. [...] Then another monument was unveiled, on our marble main staircase. So, there are many important commemorative events, including conferences, monuments, and, above all, the requiem at the cemetery.<sup>296</sup>

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<sup>295</sup> Cf. the description of Boris Pasternak's funeral: Zubok, *Zhivago's Children*, 19–21.

<sup>296</sup> Viktor Troitskii, Losev scholar, member of Losev's *kruzhok*; interview date: 01.03.2024.

The choice of words is very telling here. Troitskii calls the meetings at the cemetery a roll call [*pereklichka*], that is, a check of the presence of group members, typical of disciplinary institutions such as schools, armies, or prisons. In this one statement, he combines divine Providence (Losev's death on the day of the Christian missionaries Cyril and Methodius symbolically links him to them) and in-group discipline. Commemoration thus turns out to be not only a symbolic act but also a social obligation that sustains the existence of the *kruzhok*.

In the 35 years separating Kossakovskii's film and the interview that I conducted with Troitskii, the cult of Losev had fully taken shape. Excesses of veneration were eliminated; Losev's commemoration was placed within the strict framework of an Orthodox rite, and a regular and 'thorough' performance of requiem became a matter of pride. More traditional monuments or personal belongings, which were turned into museum exhibits, began to serve as material objects that contained his charisma. However, the physical objects with which Losev interacted, and which therefore absorbed part of his charisma, remain significant.<sup>297</sup> For example, in October 2018, during the 26th 'Losev Readings' [*Losevskie chteniia*], a chair, a large photograph of Losev, and a blanket that belonged to him were placed on the stage in the hall of the Faculty of Philosophy at Moscow State University to 'recreate the atmosphere.'<sup>298</sup>

Monuments to Losev also play a vital role in his commemoration. Aza Takho-Godi writes in detail about the first one, erected in 2006 in the courtyard of the 'Losev House' Library, which is a bust on a granite pedestal with an inscription, 'Great Russian Philosopher Aleksei Losev,' (sculptor Vasilii Gerasimov). She claims that it is the first monument to a Russian philosopher in Russia,<sup>299</sup> thus excluding materialists and socialists (such as Aleksandr

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<sup>297</sup> James Frazer called such beliefs and practices 'contagious magic.' See: James George Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion* (New York (State): The Macmillan company, 1922), 11–12.

<sup>298</sup> I am grateful to Ekaterina Rozova, who worked at the Faculty of Philosophy at MSU at the time, for telling me about it and showing me a photograph of the event.

<sup>299</sup> Takho-Godi, *Losev*, 465.

Radishchev, Aleksandr Herzen, Nikolai Chernyshevskii and Georgii Plekhanov), and even philosopher-writers, praised in Soviet times, from the philosophical canon. Narrowing the canon in this way allows her to present the tradition of Russian religious philosophy, and Losev as part of it, as the only one with ‘genuine’ philosophical significance. Such an approach is later shared by other members of the *kruzhok* when they discuss the memorialisation of the philosopher.<sup>300</sup> Other monuments eventually appeared: one, as Troitskii mentions in the interview, inside the ‘Losev House’ Library; another in Losev’s hometown, Novocherkassk; and another in the Russian State Library for the Blind, alongside memorial plaques, medals, and lecture rooms at Moscow State University and Moscow Pedagogical University named after him.<sup>301</sup>

All these objects offer material evidence of Losev’s successful canonisation in the Russian cultural space. My interviewee, close to the centre of the *kruzhok*, told me that while in the 1970s–1990s Aza Takho-Godi was ‘the main promoter’ of Losev, later the situation changed:

Last year [2023] was revealing [in this regard]. I think I only did one or maybe two interviews about Losev. Aza Alibekovna didn’t give any interviews. But we made a special website where we collected all the materials from the Internet, of all kinds: from small ones, such as a book exhibition in a library in Anadyr’, to programs on TV.<sup>302</sup> There are about 60 links. And this is only what I found, and I am not sure that I found everything. [...] We didn’t even know that there was a conference on Aleksei Fedorovich somewhere in Shuia. This is a new phenomenon [...] there are new people

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<sup>300</sup> For example: Elena Takho-Godi, “‘Za talant prikhoditsia i postradat’, i posluzhit’: professor Elena Takho-Godi — o zhiznennom puti russkogo filosa Aleksia Loseva,” *Rossiiskaia gazeta*, May 24, 2023, <https://rg.ru/2023/05/24/za-talant-prihoditsia-i-postradat-i-posluzhit.html>.

<sup>301</sup> “Skul’ptura,” *Ves’ Losev*, <http://losev.domloseva.ru/lichnost/losev-v-iskusstve/skulptura/>.

<sup>302</sup> “130-letie so dnia rozhdeniia Aleksia Fedorovicha Loseva,” *Ves’ Losev*, September 26, 2023, <http://losev.domloseva.ru/news/130-letie-so-dnja-rozhdenija-a-f-loseva/>.

who have never seen Losev and, perhaps, even people who knew him, but who read something and sometimes write some interesting things.<sup>303</sup>

The dissociation of the intellectual cult from the *kruzhok* structure and personal relationships proves the success of Losev's canonisation. This 'new phenomenon' is the result of the efforts of the *kruzhok*'s members, yet it has extended, at least in part, beyond their control. Because of them, Losev has become a significant cultural figure; however, this also means that his life and philosophy attract the interest of people who have no connection to his circle and have never experienced his charisma, and whose interpretations are not constrained by the social commitments of the *kruzhok*. This leads to mixed outcomes: on the website that my interviewee mentions, links to publications that offer an original view of Losev's philosophy<sup>304</sup> coexist with those that frame Losev as 'a builder of the empire,' bringing the political instrumentalisation of his image to an extreme.<sup>305</sup> This could be called the paradox of recognition: Losev's successful inclusion in the Russian cultural canon means that he has been inscribed in new post-Soviet hierarchies and has ceased to be a philosopher of the unofficial 'Hamburg score.'

However, any new interpretation of Losev's life and philosophy inevitably still has to take into account of the canonical version created by the members of his *kruzhok*. Losev's biography by Takho-Godi presents this version in the most fully articulated way. From the very first pages, this almost hagiographical text frames Losev as a lone Teacher of wisdom: 'he was the Teacher for everyone, but there was no one he could talk to about the deeply hidden and dear, intimately spiritual and secret, with which his soul blossomed.'<sup>306</sup> For an external reader who does not necessarily share the ethical presuppositions of Losev's followers and

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<sup>303</sup> Anonymous, philologist, member of Losev's *kruzhok*; interview date: 25.01.2024.

<sup>304</sup> Vladimir Shallar', "Losev kak dekonstruktor platonicheskogo fallogotsentrizma, imperskoi estetiki i modernoi sub"ektnosti," Predanie.ru, September 22, 2023, <https://blog.predanie.ru/article/losev-kak-dekonstruktor-fallogotsentrizma-platonizma-imperskoj-estetiki-i-modernoj-subektnosti/>.

<sup>305</sup> Vladimir Mozhegov, "Aleksi Losev — stroitel' imperii," *Vzgliad*, September 22, 2023, <https://vz.ru/opinions/2023/9/22/1230805.html>.

<sup>306</sup> Takho-Godi, *Losev*, 7.

acolytes, this unctuous image and Takho-Godi's moralising might seem even comical.<sup>307</sup> For people close to Losev's circle, however, this book solidified his canonical image, and even those who tried to talk about Losev differently had to relate to it in one way or another. Yet alternative narratives were met with resistance, as Takho-Godi not only refused to discuss in her book anything that contradicted the image of a pious, wise man but also passionately defended this image against any critics, whom she considered enemies.<sup>308</sup>

Thus, Aza Takho-Godi and her associates sought to promote Losev's image as 'the last idealist,' the personification of the intellectual and moral values of Russian religious philosophy. They tried to shape the scholarly narrative: first, by relying on a vast network of friendly relations and academic alliances, which was, at least in part, purposefully created;<sup>309</sup> and second, by retaining control over the publication of Losev's texts and collections of research works and memoirs. Just as Hegel's disciples compiled and edited his texts, presenting his philosophy as a complete system and describing him as politically loyal and religiously conservative,<sup>310</sup> members of Losev's *kruzhok* reinterpreted Losev's philosophy, avoiding the most controversial issues<sup>311</sup> and later even portraying him as a 'patriot.'

In attempts to shape this narrative, members of the *kruzhok* have not only written their own texts, academic or memorial, but also selected and moderated papers by others. Regular

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<sup>307</sup> See, for example, how Losev's father is described: 'Yes, Fedor Pavlovich loved music, wine and women. His life was a failure.' Ibid, 8.

<sup>308</sup> 'A.F. [Losev] himself, by a strange habit of a true scholar, cited even his enemies, with respect to others' opinion if it was well-founded. I always protested (female emotions): "They criticise you, and you cite them."' Ibid, 302.

<sup>309</sup> Bibikhin overtly discusses this when describing Losev's funeral in 1988: 'N. and Sh. talked, a pretentious saucebox and a rattlebrain, two symbols of the Moscow University named after Lomonosov. Aza couldn't stop them: she needs to strengthen her position.' Bibikhin, *Aleksei Fedorovich Losev. Sergei Sergeevich Averintsev*, 297.

<sup>310</sup> 'The changes ranged from minor corrections to the rearrangement of paragraphs and elimination of some parts of the text.' Nikolai Plotnikov, "Dukh i bukva. K istorii izdaniia Gegelia," *Put'*, no. 7 (1995): 261–89.

<sup>311</sup> See, for example, doubts in their probity as publishers: Sergei Zemlianoi, "Klerikal'no-konservativnaia mifologicheskaia distopiia: Aleksei Losev," *Russkii zhurnal*, October 9, 2000.

conferences on Losev, such as ‘Losev Readings’ (1988–2023), ‘Synthesis in Russian and World Artistic Culture’ (2001–2023) and ‘Space and Time in Literature and Philosophy’ (2018–2025)<sup>312</sup> allow them to bring together scholars who work in the same framework and promote canonical interpretations of Losev’s philosophy. Viktor Troitskii told me in the interview that he and other fellows of the ‘Losev house’ Library ‘secure Losev’s name on our cultural map’ by organising educational events for schoolchildren and students, as well as academic conferences for doctoral researchers:

The work of the museum is now primarily oriented towards the youth. We try as often as possible to invite delegations from Moscow University, the Russian State University for Humanities, and the Higher School of Economics. [...] Another obvious focus is work with schoolchildren, for them to simply hear [Losev's] name. I think that many Moscow children hear the names of Losev, Florenskii, and Berdiaev for the first time here.

— *I watched a special youth conference on your YouTube channel which you chaired. It is also held regularly, right?*

It’s a little different. This is the scholarly part. In addition to the general conferences, we also work with young researchers and graduate students. We deliberately chose such a [broad] unifying theme, ‘Space and Time in Literature and Philosophy.’ [...] Many young people present their research there.<sup>313</sup>

Textbooks and encyclopaedias are another important tool used to convey to students the idea of Losev’s key position within the Russian philosophical canon of the twentieth century. Textbooks help to solidify intellectual reputations and to legitimise research approaches, as well as general definitions and classifications.<sup>314</sup> In Bourdieu’s logic, these dominant

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<sup>312</sup> “Konferentsii,” Ves' Losev, <http://losev.domloseva.ru/vokrug-loseva/konferencii/>

<sup>313</sup> Viktor Troitskii, Losev scholar, member of Losev’s *kruzhok*; interview date: 01.03.2024.

<sup>314</sup> See the analysis of Russian textbooks on sociology with Bourdieu’s method in: Alexander Bikbov and Stanislav Gavrilenko, “Rossiiskaia sotsiologiia: avtonomiia pod voprosom (chast' 2),” *Logos*, no. 2 (2003), 68.

categories, produced in dominant academic positions, shape the university doxa: that is, a self-evident way of intellectually structuring the social world. The chapters on Losev in university textbooks on the history of Russian philosophy are especially telling in this regard, as they showcase the discursive tools of philosophical canonisation in the most accessible form.

In the Introduction, I mentioned that as early as 1948, in the émigré *The History of Russian Philosophy* by Vasilii Zenkovskii, Losev is presented as a successor of the tradition of religious philosophy associated with Vladimir Solov'ev, Sergei Bulgakov, and Pavel Florenskii. At first glance, it is surprising that contemporary Russian textbooks still discuss Losev's philosophy in this way, without taking into account the Soviet political or intellectual context — despite the availability of all his texts, including his works of the 1960s–1980s. However, this can be easily explained by the fact that these textbooks rely on the approach to Losev's philosophy developed within his *kruzhok*. For example, in the textbook *The History of Russian Philosophy*, edited by Mikhail Maslin, Head of the Department of the History of Russian Philosophy at Moscow State University, which was first published in 2001 and has undergone many reprints, the chapter on Losev is written by Aza Takho-Godi. This chapter offers a condensed canonical interpretation of Losev's philosophy as it took shape in the 1980s–1990s. Three key aspects reveal how this interpretation expanded from his *kruzhok* into the broader academic context:

1. Losev is placed in the section 'Russian Religious Philosophy in the Twentieth Century,' and not in 'Russian Philosophical Thought of the Soviet and Post-Soviet Periods,' which excludes him from the Soviet context and inscribes him into the national philosophical tradition with the highest intellectual prestige in the Russian philosophical field. Moreover, this allows Losev — the only author from the second half of the twentieth century — to have his own chapter. By contrast, Soviet thinkers, even the most original ones, are covered only in a passage each in the chapter 'New Tendencies and Currents in Philosophical Studies (1960–90s)'. Thus, the structure of the text itself highlights Losev's unique place in the history of Russian philosophy.

2. In the description of Losev's philosophy, this logic is even more explicit. Takho-Godi defines it as 'the highest synthesis,' that is, a 'dialectical' combination of idea and matter, Orthodox faith and philosophical mind.<sup>315</sup> Such an interpretation, elevating Losev beyond the divisions between philosophical schools and currents, culminates in a direct assertion of his uniqueness: 'It is hard to place Losev within the narrow boundaries of an unambiguous definition. He expressed his own singularity, his individuality which, according to him, cannot be explained, in a short formula: "I am Losev."'<sup>316</sup>

3. Takho-Godi characterises *History of Ancient Aesthetics* as a philosophy of culture. She argues that for Losev, aesthetics was a means of describing ancient culture as the unity of the spiritual (mythology and philosophy) and the material (social and economic structures). She postulates the continuity of Losev's philosophy, denying any rupture between his early (1916–1930) and late (1953–1988) works and claiming that attention to social and economic factors 'only enriched' his synthetic philosophy of culture.<sup>317</sup> Thus, she presents Losev as a universal thinker, unbound by any disciplinary constraints, and therefore possessing a unique epistemological advantage that allows him to grasp ancient culture in its wholeness.

This image is subsequently reproduced in other textbooks whose authors, without any ties to the *kruzhok*, adhere to the canonical interpretations. For example, there is also a whole section dedicated to Losev in the textbook *The History of Russian Philosophy* (2012), edited by Aleksandr Zamaleev, Head of the Department of History of Russian Philosophy at Saint Petersburg State University. This text follows the same logic: Losev is discussed in the section 'Classic Period of Russian Philosophy,' and not in 'Russian Soviet Philosophy,' and without any connection to the Soviet context. Nikolai Bezlepkin, the author of this section, presents Losev as a philosopher of language; however, he not only ignores several of Losev's works on the theory of language written in the 1960s–1980s, but also does not go beyond summarising his work *Philosophy of Name* [*Filosofii imeni*, 1927]. Such an approach clearly

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<sup>315</sup> Michail Maslin, ed., *Istoriia russkoi filosofii* (Moscow: Respublika, 2001), 528.

<sup>316</sup> Ibid, 534.

<sup>317</sup> Ibid, 531–533.

demonstrates that Bezlepkin's text relies on Losev's philosophical reputation established through the efforts of scholars from his circle. By focusing solely on Losev's works from the 1920s and ignoring his use of Marxism, it becomes much easier to reproduce the canonised image of Losev as the bearer of the tradition of pre-revolutionary Russian religious philosophy who aspired to perform 'the highest synthesis.'<sup>318</sup>

Encyclopaedias and dictionaries are another useful instrument for solidifying hierarchies in the philosophical field. I will limit myself to one particularly illustrative example. The third volume of the *Philosophical Encyclopaedia*, published in 1964, features a short entry on Losev, which, as I have already mentioned, appears to have been written by him. His philosophy is characterised there as follows:

In the 1920s, he attempted to combine elements of Neo-Platonism with Hegel's dialectics and Husserl's phenomenology. Later, in the 1930s–40s, he shifted to the Marxist perspective. From this perspective, he studied problems of ancient mythology, philosophy, aesthetics, literature, and categories of dialectics and criticised bourgeois philosophy.<sup>319</sup>

In 2000, the *New Philosophical Encyclopaedia*, an updated version of the 1960s edition, was published by the Institute of Philosophy of the Russian Academy of Sciences. Here, the entry on Losev was written by Viktor Troitskii. Compared to the 1960s edition, the length of the entry had more than tripled (excluding the bibliography), indicating the success of Losev's canonisation. Most importantly, his philosophy is interpreted in a drastically different way from that in the earlier edition:

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<sup>318</sup> Judging by Bezlepkin's description of Losev's aspiration for synthesis, he does not seek to provide any complex analysis: 'Losev's works reflect his pursuit of universalism, of combining all the best practices accumulated by the philosophical thought.' Aleksandr Zamaleev, ed., *Istoriia russkoi filosofii* (Saint Petersburg: Izdatel'stvo filosofskogo fakul'teta SPbGU, 2012), 265.

<sup>319</sup> "Losev Aleksei Fedorovich," in *Filosofskaia entsiklopediia* (Moscow: Sovetskaia entsiklopediia, 1964), 3: 255.

Following the philosophical tradition of unitotality [*vseedinstvo*] and personalistic principles of Palamite theology, Losev built a systemic worldview which can be characterised as energy symbolism and Neo-Platonism interpreted through Orthodoxy.<sup>320</sup>

As we can see, the entry had undergone an impressive transformation: not only did the ‘Marxist perspective’ disappear completely, but Hegel and Husserl were also replaced by ‘the tradition of unitotality’ and Palamite theology. This shows that Losev’s cult — which was created in his *kruzhok* and extolled him not only as a professional philosopher but also as a Teacher who went beyond analysing culture, ‘building a systemic worldview’ or teaching others how to live — had become successfully entrenched in Russian academia.

Thus, within fifteen years, from the late 1980s to the early 2000s, Losev’s cult was transferred from his *kruzhok* to Russian academia, taking its place in the Russian intellectual canon. His reputation as an exceptional philosopher, the last bearer of the tradition of religious philosophy, or ‘the scholar-monk in the world’ who brought together rational thinking and Orthodox spirituality, was solidified. In its main outlines, it has remained intact ever since. Scholars from his circle managed to engage with key Russian philosophical institutions (the Institute of Philosophy, the Faculty of Philosophy at MSU, etc.) to impose their interpretations of Losev’s life and work as canonical. They sought to purify his image of any controversy and of all Soviet vices, obscuring the historical context and highlighting his personality as the embodiment of the idea of ‘the highest synthesis’ of faith and knowledge.

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<sup>320</sup> Viktor Troitskii, “Losev Aleksei Fedorovich,” in *Novaia Filosofskaia Entsiklopediia*, vol. 2 (Mysl', 2010).

## CHAPTER TWO. SERGEI AVERINTSEV AS AN INTELLECTUAL STAR

‘I don’t remember who, whether Aristotle or Averintsev, once said...’: the poet Olga Sedakova, Sergei Averintsev’s friend and student, often cites this phrase by Venedikt Erofeev to show Averintsev’s immense cultural importance, ‘the scope of the living legend,’ i.e. his recognition in his own lifetime as someone who ranked alongside one of the greatest thinkers in human history. She first used this quotation in her 1997 article on Averintsev’s intellectual method<sup>1</sup> and has repeated it many times since: for example, in the lengthy article ‘S.S. Averintsev. Works and Days’ [S.S. *Averintsev. Trudy i dni*, 2005], written not long after his death,<sup>2</sup> or, most recently, in a 2024 interview dedicated to the publication of the first volume of Averintsev’s *Collected Works*.<sup>3</sup> This phrase has become a common way to characterise Averintsev. Invariably followed by an ellipsis, it now serves to emphasise Averintsev’s role in Russian culture.<sup>4</sup>

This ellipsis is telling, since it functions here as an elementary form of cult-building, cutting off the end of the sentence and thus changing its meaning, turning it into a reproducible formula, whose sole purpose is to reaffirm and reinforce the cultural significance of the cult figure. In Erofeev’s original text, this sentence reads as follows: ‘I don’t remember who, whether Averintsev or Aristotle, once said: “Animalia omnia post coitum oppressi sunt,” which means “every creature is sombre after coitus,” and I am always sombre, both before coitus

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<sup>1</sup> Olga Sedakova, “Rassuzhdenie o metode,” in *Sergei Sergeevich Averintsev: Vospominaniia. Razmyshleniia. Posviashcheniia* (Sviato-Filaretovskii pravoslavno-khristianskii institut, 2020), 170.

<sup>2</sup> Olga Sedakova, “S.S. Averintsev. Trudy i dni,” in *Sergei Sergeevich Averintsev: Vospominaniia. Razmyshleniia. Posviashcheniia* (Sviato-Filaretovskii pravoslavno-khristianskii institut, 2020), 63.

<sup>3</sup> Olga Sedakova, “«Ponimanie kak vzgliad ne v zerkalo, a v okno». Olga Sedakova — o sobranii sochinenii Sergeia Averintseva,” Gorky, December 15, 2024, <https://gorky.media/context/ponimanie-kak-vzglyad-ne-v-zerkalo-a-v-okno/>.

<sup>4</sup> Such as in a report on a memorial event in Tver’, or in an article written by the politician Grigorii Iavlinskii. See: Kseniia Tsvetkova, “Chitaia Averintseva,” Preobrazhenskoe bratstvo, January 4, 2014, <https://psmb.ru/a/chitaya-averinceva.html>; Grigorii Iavlinskii, “Averintsev v russkoi istorii,” *Grigory Yavlinsky*, February 16, 2005, <https://www.yavlinsky.ru/article/averintsev-v-russkoj-istorii/>.

and after.’<sup>5</sup> The continuation is crucial, as it clearly demonstrates that it was not Erofeev’s intention to include Averintsev in the intellectual canon on a par with Aristotle. The protagonist of his absurdist story *Through the Eyes of an Eccentric* [*Glazami ekstsentrīka*],<sup>6</sup> suffering from retching, throws up quotations, real and imaginary, by different authors, in hilariously bizarre combinations: Averintsev and Aristotle are followed by the Socialist Realist classic Nikolai Ostrovskii, philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer, traveller Nikolai Miklouho-Maclay, and physician Sergey Botkin. By cutting the quotation short, Sedakova completely altered its tone. And for everyone who used it after her, it then appeared to be an earnest act of acknowledgement of Averintsev’s intellectual prowess by one of the most renowned late Soviet writers. This alteration is a vivid example of how certain texts or biographical events can be reinterpreted to secure and expand the symbolic capital of the canonised cult figure. In this chapter, I examine Averintsev as an intellectual cult figure and demonstrate the significance of such symbolic work for the Russian cultural landscape of the late 20th and early 21st centuries.

Sergei Sergeevich Averintsev was born in 1937 in Moscow to the family of the biologist Sergei Vladimirovich Averintsev and Nataliia Vasil’evna Averintseva. In 1900, his father graduated from St Petersburg University and became a lecturer there; he worked for some time in European universities, then in the Russian North, and, towards the end of his life, became the head of the Zoology Department at the Moscow Region Pedagogical Institute. He played a significant role in the intellectual formation of his son. Through his father, Averintsev established a link to pre-revolutionary culture, claiming that, as a child born when his father was advanced in years (‘I could have been his grandson’), he belonged to a different epoch:

My father was born in 1875 — that’s the same year Rilke and Albert Schweitzer were born, five years earlier than Blok [...] I think that my childhood relationship with my father immediately instilled in me an unusual attitude towards historical time. The

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<sup>5</sup> Venedikt Erofeev, *Glazami ekstsentrīka* (Silver Age Publishing, 1982), 12.

<sup>6</sup> First published in 1973 in the samizdat almanac *Veche* under the title ‘*Vasilii Rozanov glazami ekstsentrīka*.’

past century was not a cut-off slice [...] but the time of my father's youth. I regarded old Russia, the Russia of the nineteenth century, as my father's world [...] So the world of Russian journals and century-old Russian literature [...] was not that far removed [from me].<sup>7</sup>

Averintsev also presented his decision to become a philologist as fulfilling his father's 'unspoken will' — the dream that 'life had denied him'. He recounted that his father, who came from a family of serfs, felt that 'it was "out of order" for him to talk about art, poems, and antiquities,' but still read Horace in the original to his teenage son, despite his not understanding a word, and thus nurtured in him an interest in antiquity: 'The Latin my father recited, the ancient Doric architecture of southern Italy he spoke to me about from personal impressions [...] this too was paternal, fatherly. For life.'<sup>8</sup>

Another aspect of his childhood often emphasised by Averintsev's friends, as well as by researchers and journalists relying on their accounts, is his serious illness, which kept him out of school until the fifth grade (around 10–11 years old) and consequently helped him avoid Soviet indoctrination.<sup>9</sup> This illness reinforced the perception of Averintsev as a distinctly non-Soviet author: he is often portrayed as 'a fragile child,' who, from a young age, became a guardian and defender of culture in a hostile environment.<sup>10</sup>

From 1956 to 1961, he studied at the Classical Department of the Philological Faculty of Moscow State University, and in 1967, he defended his thesis *Plutarch and Ancient Biography* [*Plutarkh i antichnaia biografiia*]. This work earned him the Lenin Komsomol Prize,

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<sup>7</sup> Sergei Averintsev, *Popytki ob "iasnit'sia. Besedy o kul'ture* (Pravda, 1988), 9.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 9–10.

<sup>9</sup> For example: Sedakova, "S.S. Averintsev. Trudy i dni," 61; Natalia Trauberg, "On umer, potomu chto povzroslel," *Ogonek*, March 7, 2004: 16.

<sup>10</sup> Sedakova, "S.S. Averintsev. Trudy i dni," 62; Jean-Noël Benoit, *Sergueï Averintsev: une autre dissidence*, Collection "Histoire," (Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2023), 21–22.

providing both financial support and official recognition from an early stage of his career. As the renowned Soviet physicist Sergei Kapitsa recalled in his memoirs:

At one time in 1968, I worked on the committee for the Lenin Komsomol Prize. It was the third most important prize in the USSR: the Lenin Prize, the State Prize, and the Lenin Komsomol Prize — 10,000, 5,000 and 3,000 roubles, respectively. The Committee was headed by Evgenii Velikhov, and there were two subcommittees: for sciences and technology and for the humanities. One of the possible candidates for the Humanities Prize was Sergei Averintsev. At the time, he was a very young, promising scholar who had written a dissertation on Plutarch. However, humanities scholars disputed implacably: some said that Averintsev was the star and best hope of our scholarship, and others said that he was a religious mystic, and that the Lenin Komsomol Prize was the last thing that he could count on. And no one wanted to concede. Velikhov and the secretary of the committee, Boris Mokrousov from the Komsomol Central Committee, asked me, as I worked for the subcommittee on sciences and engineering, to look into it. I read the dissertation with interest, was won over by the style and erudition and could not detect any religious tinge in this young scholar's argument. It didn't happen immediately, but I found a way to reconcile the positions and wrote a report, which resulted in Sergei Averintsev receiving the Lenin Komsomol Prize. Had this not happened, he would have been branded as a religious mystic, and maybe his career would have been quite different. So, he became an academic, a brilliant representative of our humanities on a global scale.<sup>11</sup>

Despite this success (or perhaps because of it), Averintsev was not offered a teaching position at Moscow State University. Historian and philologist Nina Braginskaia, herself a graduate of the MSU Classical Department, suggested in her interview with me that this may have been due to an unspoken practice of avoiding competition:

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<sup>11</sup> Sergei Kapitsa, *Moi vospominaniia* (ROSSPEN, 2008).

Talented students often completed their postgraduate studies and even defended their dissertations there, but then they had to leave. Neither Gasparov nor Averintsev were offered a position at the [Classical] Department, as they were potential competitors [for other associates of the Department]. There weren't many classicists at that time, and they could not specialise in the same areas. For example, Klara Petrovna Polonskaia, who had studied at MIFLI, initially worked at the Department as a specialist in ancient Greek literature. However, when Aza Alibekovna Takho-Godi, a Hellenist, became Head of the Department, Polonskaia realised that she would have to switch to Latin literature; otherwise, she would have no future.<sup>12</sup>

Averintsev then worked as a researcher, first at the State Institute of Linguistics (1966–69) and then at the Institute of World Literature of the Academy of Sciences (1969–92), where he became Head of the Ancient Literature Department in 1981. In the late 1960s, he gained recognition for a series of entries on religious topics published in volumes 4 and 5 of the *Philosophical Encyclopaedia*.<sup>13</sup> From 1969 to 1972, he lectured on Ancient and Byzantine aesthetics at the Faculty of History at MSU. These lectures became a major cultural event, drawing audiences 'from all across Moscow.'<sup>14</sup> Two of my informants recall that the large lecture room in the First Humanities Building was so packed that Averintsev himself sometimes struggled to enter.<sup>15</sup>

Averintsev's intellectual interests were remarkably diverse. He studied ancient literature and Byzantine theology: his main work, *Poetics of Early Byzantine Literature* [*Poetika rannevizantiiskoi literatury*, 1977], offers literary and philosophical analyses of Byzantine patristics. He also studied the poetry of Viacheslav Ivanov and Osip Mandel'shtam, translated texts of the Church Fathers and German Romantics, and introduced the Soviet

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<sup>12</sup> Nina Braginskaia, historian and philologist, Averintsev's colleague, interview date: 28.12.2024.

<sup>13</sup> See further in this chapter.

<sup>14</sup> Sedakova, "S.S. Averintsev. Trudy i dni," 64.

<sup>15</sup> Nikolai Shaburov, historian, Losev's secretary and listener of Averintsev's lectures; interview date: 17.11.2024; Nina Braginskaia, historian and philologist, Averintsev's colleague, interview date: 28.12.2024.

intelligentsia to the philosophical ideas of Oswald Spengler, Carl Jung, and Jacques Maritain. In the 1990s and 2000s, he devoted himself increasingly to religious education, worked on Bible translations, delivered sermons, and wrote journalistic articles on politics and public morality.

For the last ten years of his life (1994–2004), Averintsev lived abroad and held the position of full professor of Russian literature at the University of Vienna. However, he maintained an affiliation with Moscow State University and, as some of my informants suggest, did not view his departure as permanent.<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, Averintsev's departure from Russia seems to have contributed to the fact that his posthumous reputation did not match the scale of his lifetime fame. Unlike Losev, whose legacy was actively promoted by his *kruzhok* members, led by Aza Takho-Godi, Averintsev did not have a cohesive group of students or followers. It would be unjust to say that Averintsev's name has been forgotten; he remains well known in the Russian humanities, particularly among specialists in Antiquity and early Christianity, as well as within Church circles (notably, his *Collected Works* is being published by Saint Tikhon's Orthodox University). However, it is clear that his influence is not as strong as it was in the late Soviet period.

Averintsev was not just a successful academic. By the early 1970s, he had already been recognised as an intellectual *Kulturträger* and a cult figure among the Soviet intelligentsia, and from the late 1980s onward, he became a public intellectual and played an active role in political and religious life. I will examine (1) Averintsev's intellectual strategy that allowed him to accumulate exceptional symbolic capital in the 1960s and 1970s, (2) the symbolic and social mechanisms of his intellectual cult, from its rise to its decline, and (3) the use of his fame and authority in political and religious struggles from the late 1980s to the early 2000s. I argue that his approach, focused on cultural 'crossroads,' i.e., cultural intersections

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<sup>16</sup> Olga Sedakova, poet and scholar, Averintsev's friend and colleague, interview date: 09.11.2024; Fedor Poljakov, slavist, Averintsev's colleague, interview date: 16.11.2024.

and amalgamations, corresponded to his strategy of self-positioning as a guide to ‘true’ culture.

## The Intellectual Strategy

Sergei Averintsev’s intellectual style stood out in the Soviet academic environment. Unlike Losev, who, as the previous chapter showed, had developed sophisticated tactics of using Marxism, combining parody (*stioib*), the redefinition of Marxist concepts, and the application of the Marxist method to cultural analysis, Averintsev seems to have ignored Marxism entirely. In the late Soviet period, a lack of references to ‘the classics of Marxism-Leninism’ in a scholarly publication could be regarded by academic or Party officials as a significant omission. However, in his book *Plutarch and Ancient Biography* [*Plutarkh i antichnaia biografiia*, 1973], a version of his candidate’s dissertation, which, ironically, received the Lenin Komsomol Prize, Averintsev did not cite Lenin at all and cited Marx only once, and only in the endnotes.<sup>17</sup> In *Poetics of Early Byzantine Literature* [*Poetika rannevizantiiskoi literatury*, 1977], he did not refer to either of them and included only one vague reference to ‘the Marxist scholarship’ — but even that was misleading, as it was in fact to Aron Gurevich, one of the ‘unofficial’ historians of the Middle Ages, who was criticised by orthodox Marxists for applying structuralist methods in his research.<sup>18</sup> Ignoring Marxism was a conscious tactic that formed part of his strategy of self-presentation.

Such a strategy was used by other cultural figures of this generation. For instance, Joseph Brodsky, according to Sergei Dovlatov, developed a specific model of behaviour whereby he lived as if unaware of the Soviet realities around him:

Brodsky developed an unheard-of model of behaviour. He lived not in a proletarian state, but in a monastery of his own spirit. He did not fight against the regime. He ignored it. He was not even entirely sure of its existence. His unawareness of Soviet

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<sup>17</sup> Sergei Averintsev, *Plutarkh i antichnaia biografia* (Nauka, 1973), 91.

<sup>18</sup> Sergei Averintsev, *Poetika rannevizantiiskoi literatury* (Azbuka-klassika, 2004), 16.

life seemed feigned. For example, he was sure that Dzerzhinskii was still alive. And that 'Comintern' was the name of a musical ensemble. He did not recognise the members of the Politburo. When a six-metre portrait of Mzhavanadze was mounted on the facade of his house, Brodsky said: 'Who is this? He looks like William Blake...'<sup>19</sup>

Commenting on this excerpt, Yurchak argues that 'Brodsky's Model,' which he defines as disengagement from the authoritative discourse, was increasingly widespread among the last Soviet generation.<sup>20</sup> Yet his interpretation seemingly overlooks the claim of uniqueness: Dovlatov characterises this model as 'unheard-of,' and, similarly, my informants repeatedly tell me that Averintsev 'was like no one else.'<sup>21</sup> What made this model or strategy 'unique' was, of course, not just detachment from ideology. Firstly, it implied a break with the Soviet symbolic order performed with exceptional artistry, which required careful cultivation of posture and calibration of gestures — an entire 'science of ignoring reality,' as Brodsky himself called it.<sup>22</sup> Secondly, and more importantly, this break was achieved by turning to another symbolic order far above any political distinctions: to the realm of language or, in Averintsev's case, the realm of culture. Brodsky articulated this approach in his famous passage on the poet's 'linguistic superiority:'

A poet gets into trouble because of his linguistic, and, by implication, his psychological superiority, rather than his politics. A song is a form of linguistic disobedience, and its sound casts a doubt on more than a concrete political system: it questions the entire existential order.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Sergei Dovlatov, "Remeslo," in *Chemodan: Povesti* (Moskovskii rabochii, 1991), 199–200.

<sup>20</sup> Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton University Press, 2013), 126–127.

<sup>21</sup> Tatiana Borodai, philosopher, Averintsev's colleague at MSU, interview date: 10.12.2024.

<sup>22</sup> Joseph Brodsky, "A Writer Is a Lonely Traveler, and No One Is His Helper," *New York Times Magazine*, October 1, 1972: 87.

<sup>23</sup> Joseph Brodsky, "The Child of Civilization," in *50 Poems*, by Osip Mandelstam, 1st ed. (Persea Books, 1977), 15.

The point here is not that the poet challenges the political regime or merely no longer responds to the ‘constative dimension’ of ideological discourse, but that he lives in another dimension entirely, attuning himself to the voice of language (‘which we know under the nicknames of Muse or Inspiration’), thus occupying a distinctive and potentially dangerous position. And that is precisely what set him apart from the ‘normal people’ described by Yurchak. The symbolic core of such a self-presentation strategy is the claim to belong to ‘culture, whose main tool is language,’<sup>24</sup> an aspiration to become a kind of oracle or guide able to lead his followers out of Soviet culture into a ‘true’ one.

Averintsev consistently used this strategy, tracing his connection (through his father) to prestigious pre-revolutionary Russian culture, defined by Silver Age literature and philosophy.<sup>25</sup> In his works, this break with the Soviet symbolic order is signalled by the significant absence of Marxism (even in the form of ritualistic references to Marx or Lenin), where the structure of a Soviet scholarly text would normally have implied their presence. Iurii Lotman called such an absence a ‘minus device,’ that is, a violation of the reader’s expectations or ‘consistent and conscious rejection’ of historically determined artistic forms ‘felt by the reader.’<sup>26</sup> As in Brodsky’s case, this decision to ignore the Soviet written and unwritten norms was not due to a simple lack of awareness. Averintsev certainly knew exactly when and where he was expected to cite Lenin, and his deliberate disregard of these expectations required a continuous effort of non-recognition.

Olga Sedakova, a friend, admirer, and scholar of Averintsev, highlighted in the interview his intentional avoidance of ideological prescriptions:

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<sup>24</sup> Jane Knox, “Ierarkhiia drugikh v poezii Brodskogo,” in *Poetika Brodskogo*, ed. Lev Losev (Hermitage, 1986), 162.

<sup>25</sup> On the romanticisation of the pre-revolutionary past in the late Soviet period, see: Pavel Khazanov, *The Russia That We Have Lost: Pre-Soviet Past as Anti-Soviet Discourse* (The University of Wisconsin Press, 2023), 9–16.

<sup>26</sup> Yury Lotman, *Analysis of the Poetic Text* (Ardis, 1976), 23.

I can't even say that it was a counter-current to the official culture. It simply could not be connected to it at all. It was astonishing how such a thing could be allowed when every letter in someone else's work was scrutinised. [...] It was his [behavioural] tactic — he acted like someone who had fallen off the moon, as if he understood absolutely nothing of what was going on around him. Nataliia Petrovna, his wife, would take him by the hand — otherwise Serezha wouldn't find his way around the city. He played the role of, well, someone like a holy fool. And that's why the authorities thought: well, what can you ask of him if he knows nothing at all, sees nothing? In fact, he saw everything perfectly well, very sharply and clearly. But he played this kind of role. [...]

I heard that some people from the very ideological heights once visited the Institute of World Literature to invite him to contribute to an anti-Zionist collection of works. And that was when he put on a whole show and started saying: 'You've come to see me?! But I don't know what Zionism is! I only know ancient Hebrew.' In the end, he gave them the impression of an idiot, and they left him alone.<sup>27</sup>

This pretence, a sort of 'playing the fool',<sup>28</sup> demonstrates a deep understanding of the rules of the Soviet academic game, which allowed him to avoid overt ideological compromises and remain within the Soviet academic system. His ability to navigate the public sphere adroitly became evident in the late 1980s, when Averintsev finally had the opportunity to realise his ambitions and act as a public intellectual, actively engaging in social and political life.<sup>29</sup>

This strategy was distinct from dissident opposition to the Soviet regime (which, indeed, could be called 'a counter-current to the official culture,' i.e. a way of challenging the regime

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<sup>27</sup> Olga Sedakova, poet and scholar, Averintsev's friend and colleague, interview date: 09.11.2024.

<sup>28</sup> Foolishness (*iurodstvo*) is a persistent tradition of cultural resistance to state power in Russia through an inversion of imposed values, continuing in various forms in the late Soviet period: Oliver Ready, *Persisting in Folly: Russian Writers in Search of Wisdom, 1963–2013* (Peter Lang, 2017), 38–49.

<sup>29</sup> See the third section of this chapter.

while sharing certain of its assumptions and premises<sup>30</sup>) and, therefore, could prompt uncensored writers to mock this (relatively) safe cultural dissent.<sup>31</sup> For example, for the poet and dissident Viktor Krivulin, to write poetry ‘for real’ meant refusing not only the ‘small joys’ of Soviet consumption but also the ‘great joys’ of culture, ‘in the form of a foreign-currency [valiutnyi] Mandel’shtam edition with a foreword by Dymshits, the heavenly singing of Serezha Averintsev for Hermitage ladies, and young Spivakov with Lotmans in the front row of the Philharmonic.’<sup>32</sup> The ironic formula ‘the heavenly singing for Hermitage ladies’ serves here to define escapist intellectual work, confined, as in a museum, to a narrow authorised space and established cultural hierarchies. This formula also implies a haughty disregard for the ‘ladies’ who enthusiastically embrace this type of intellectual work.

Krivulin’s irony is only partially justified (while his sexism is not; we know quite well that there were plenty of men among Averintsev’s admirers) as, although escapist motifs can indeed be found both in Averintsev’s writings<sup>33</sup> and in the accounts of his friends and colleagues,<sup>34</sup> he sincerely regarded philological research as the realisation of humanity’s universal task: to understand another human being.<sup>35</sup> Unlike Losev, who engaged with Marxism, developing its concepts and applying its method, Averintsev demonstratively ignored it, opposing Soviet authoritative discourse (through a ‘minus device’) to ‘world culture.’<sup>36</sup> In his view, the study

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<sup>30</sup> On strategy of ‘civil obedience’ (‘Respect the Soviet Constitution!’): Benjamin Nathans, *To the Success of Our Hopeless Cause: The Many Lives of the Soviet Dissident Movement*, 1st ed. (Princeton University Press, 2024), 23–25, 327.

<sup>31</sup> See as well on Joseph Brodsky and Vaclav Havel discussion: Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More*, 106–107.

<sup>32</sup> Viktor Krivulin, *Okhota na Mamonta* (Russko-Baltiiskii informatsionnyi tsentr BLITS, 1998), 6. See on Krivulin’s understanding of poetry as a historical mission in: Ilya Kukulín, “Dvoínoe «ia» v dialoge s istoriei. Mandel’shtam v osnove istoriosofskoi mysli novoi poézii,” *Vozdukh*, nos. 3–4 (2016), <http://www.litkarta.ru/projects/vozdukh/issues/2016-3-4/kukulin-mandelshtam/>.

<sup>33</sup> Averintsev, *Popytki ob”iasnit’sia. Besedy o kul’ture*, 10.

<sup>34</sup> Nina Braginskaia, historian and philologist, Averintsev’s colleague, interview date: 28.12.2024.

<sup>35</sup> Sergei Averintsev, “Filologíia,” in *Sofiia-Logos. Slovar’* (Dukh i litera, 2006), 456.

<sup>36</sup> On Soviet concepts of ‘world literature’ and ‘world culture,’ see: Katerina Clark, *Moscow, the Fourth Rome: Stalinism, Cosmopolitanism, and the Evolution of Soviet Culture, 1931–1941* (Harvard University Press, 2011), 169–209; Gilburd, *To See Paris and Die*, 30–34, 52–53. Galin Tihanov, “World Literature in the Soviet

of culture was not merely intellectual work but a mission, the fulfilment of ‘voluntarily assumed intellectual and moral obligations.’<sup>37</sup>

An example of this strategy can be found in Averintsev’s early work ‘On Understanding the Meaning of an Inscription on the Concha of the Central Apse in Saint Sophia Cathedral in Kyiv’ [*K uiasneniiu smysla nadpisi nad konkhoi tsentral’noi apsidy Sofii Kievskoi*] (the article was published in 1972, but Olga Sedakova claims that she heard it as early as 1964<sup>38</sup>). The pedantically academic, or, as Sedakova puts it, ‘conspiratorial,’ title presents the text as a scholarly commentary on a specific detail of an eleventh-century Kyiv church, of interest only to a small circle of specialists. In reality, Averintsev offers much more than just an interpretation of the inscription running along the edge of the main altar vault (Psalm 46:5, ‘God is in the midst of her; she shall not be moved: God shall help her, and that right early’). He distinguishes between the ‘arithmetic’ and the ‘higher mathematics’ of humanitarian knowledge: while the former is limited to discovering a connection between the text in question and its immediate historical context, the latter must reveal ‘behind the clear meaning [...] a certain perspective, a glimpse of other meanings,’ in other words, the unity of the Christian cultural tradition.<sup>39</sup> Thus, the commentary on the inscription transforms into a cultural, yet simultaneously theological, reflection on the meaning of Sophia, the Wisdom of God: in the Old Testament, ancient mythology and philosophy, patristics, and, finally, in eleventh-century Slavic Orthodoxy. We should also consider the context of Russian religious philosophy, with Sophiology as one of its key subjects (especially in the works of Vladimir Solov’ev, Sergei Bulgakov, and Pavel Florenskii), a context not discussed explicitly, but nonetheless important for the academic intelligentsia. There is absolutely nothing Marxist in this reflection; on the contrary, Averintsev concludes it with a sublime vision of the Christian

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Union: Infrastructure and Ideological Horizons,” in *World Literature in the Soviet Union*, ed. Galin Tihanov et al. (Academic Studies Press, 2023), 15–40.

<sup>37</sup> Averintsev, *Popytki ob”iasnit’sia. Besedy o kul’ture*, 4

<sup>38</sup> Olga Sedakova, “Apologiiia ratsional'nogo,” in *Sergei Sergeevich Averintsev: Vospominaniia. Razmyshleniia. Posviashcheniia* (Sviato-Filaretovskii pravoslavno-khristianskii institut, 2020), 198.

<sup>39</sup> Sergei Averintsev, “K uiasneniiu smysla nadpisi nad konkhoi tsentral'noi apsidy Sofii Kievskoi,” in *Sofiia-Logos. Slovar'* (Dukh i litera, 2006), 549–550.

world in which the spiritual and material realms are closely intertwined, ‘the higher descends to the lower, and the lower ascends to the higher.’<sup>40</sup>

Another example of such religious ‘contraband,’ i.e., religious teaching hidden behind scholarly work, is Averintsev’s commentary on Hegel’s early theological writings, which he wrote with his colleague and friend, German philologist Aleksandr Mikhailov.<sup>41</sup> In this commentary, published in the second volume of a two-volume edition of Russian translations of Hegel’s works on the philosophy of religion (1975), Averintsev and Mikhailov allowed themselves to write what they could not have written in an article or a book at that time. They did not so much comment on Hegel as engage in a debate with him, showing the Soviet reader that the German philosopher misunderstood biblical history and subjected the Gospel text to ‘direct violence,’ to expound his own rationalistic and individualistic view of religion. For example, commenting on ‘The Life of Jesus,’ they wrote: ‘Under the pen of the Protestant philosopher Hegel, the sacrament of the Eucharist transforms into an allegorical ritual that combines rationalism, sensitivity, and theatricality in the spirit of Masonic ceremonies.’<sup>42</sup> In essence, this was a creative way of circumventing censorship when discussing religious topics that were, if not directly prohibited, then at least ideologically unreliable and potentially dangerous. Instead of using Aesopian language,<sup>43</sup> Averintsev and Mikhailov expressed their views quite directly and unambiguously, but within the framework of the ‘technical’ genre of historical commentary, concealed in endnotes. Hegel served only as a pretext to suggest covertly to the readers interested in religious topics (and perhaps

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid, 579.

<sup>41</sup> I am grateful to Nikolai Plotnikov for directing my attention to this case.

<sup>42</sup> “Primechaniia,” in *Filosofiiia religii*, by Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, vol. 2 (Mysl’, 1977), 503.

<sup>43</sup> On Aesopian language as a means of resisting censorship, see: Lev Losev, *On the Beneficence of Censorship: Aesopian Language in Modern Russian Literature* (O. Sagner in Kommission, 1984); Samantha Sherry, *Discourses of Regulation and Resistance: Censoring Translation in the Stalin and Khrushchev Era Soviet Union* (Edinburgh University Press, 2015), 141–152; Irina Sandomirskaja, “Aesopian Language: The Politics and Poetics of Naming the Unnameable,” in *The Vernaculars of Communism*, ed. Petre Petrov and Lara Ryazanova-Clarke (Routledge, 2015), 63–87.

already aware of where to look for the most interesting parts) a ‘correct’ interpretation of the Gospel, based on confessional tradition rather than secular philosophy.

Amongst Averintsev’s publications of this kind, breaking with the official discourse and more or less explicitly opposing it with an alternative (Christian) system of values, the most important for the emergence of his intellectual cult was a series of entries for the *Philosophical Encyclopaedia*. In the second half of the 1960s, he wrote around thirty entries on religious topics for the fourth and fifth volumes of this encyclopaedia: ‘The New Testament,’ ‘The Epistles of Paul,’ ‘Sophia,’ ‘Theodicy,’ ‘Theology,’ ‘Christianity,’ and others. In principle, the genre of the encyclopaedia entry presupposes a concise, rigorous, and neutral compilation of existing knowledge rather than original research, but, as the veneration expressed by his admirers in numerous memoirs and interviews shows, Averintsev succeeded in making them distinctive and compelling.<sup>44</sup>

The five-volume *Philosophical Encyclopaedia*, published between 1960 and 1970, both established Marxist dogma through such entries as ‘Basis and Superstructure,’ ‘Opportunism,’ and ‘The Union of the Working Class and Peasantry,’ and included unorthodox entries written by the Sixtiers philosophers [*filosofy-shestidesiatniki*], such as Eval’d Il’enkov and Merab Mamardashvili, who sought to grant philosophy greater autonomy. Many participants in the project noted the compromises inherent to the *Encyclopaedia*, linking them to the editorial struggle between the philosophical *nomenklatura*, led by the editor-in-chief Fedor Konstantinov, and the younger generation of authors and editors, who saw the de-ideologization of research as their intellectual and moral duty.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> For example: Sergei Bocharov, “Averintsev v nashei istorii,” *Voprosy literatury*, no. 6 (2004): 19–24; Anatolii Alekseev, “Vmeste s Averintsevym,” in *Drugoi Rim: Izbrannye stat’i*, by Sergei Averintsev (Amfora, 2005), 6–9; Konstantin Sigov, “Aktual’nye aspekty eskhatologii Sergeia Averintseva,” paper presented at international conference “Eskhatologicheskoe uchenie Tserkvi,” Moscow, November 2005, <https://theolcom.ru/doc/day2.sect3.08.Sigov.pdf>.

<sup>45</sup> See, for example, Renata Galtseva’s memoirs, who described her work in the *Philosophical Encyclopaedia* as a ‘small-scale crusade’ against those ‘fighters of the philosophical front’ who made their careers of Heads of departments or corresponding members of the Academy of Science: ‘We didn’t have any strategy; everything depended on the pre-logical unity, without which, alas, no success of a “common cause,” especially outside the law, is inconceivable. A decade-long campaign lay ahead of us, with acute

Given the official character of the *Encyclopaedia* and this complex power dynamic, Averintsev's entries could not be entirely free of references to Marx and Engels; however, even in this compendium of key principles of Soviet philosophy, he managed to express ideas that clearly contradicted the official views on religion as a form of idealist worldview in which human beings are enslaved by the products of their own imagination.<sup>46</sup> For example, in the entry 'The New Testament,' he asserted the fundamental difference between pagan and Christian beliefs.<sup>47</sup> In the entry 'The Epistles of Paul' — whose very inclusion in the Soviet *Philosophical Encyclopaedia* was far from self-evident (as former editor Iurii Popov told me in an interview, the reviewers from the Institute of Scientific Atheism looked at it 'wildly' and asked, 'What do you need this for?')<sup>48</sup> — Averintsev discusses the unique Christian concept of freedom, central to the 'idealistic' tradition that runs from Paul to Augustine, Luther, Pascal, and Kierkegaard.<sup>49</sup> In the extensive entry 'Christianity,' Averintsev essentially engaged in apologetics, not only explaining the foundations of Christian dogmatics but also arguing for the uniqueness and spiritual depth of Christianity.<sup>50</sup>

Some members of the intelligentsia interested in religion or spirituality read Averintsev's entries with 'hidden awe,'<sup>51</sup> and Sedakova even claimed that 'people who later became

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confrontations, protracted battles, and hard marches, which required a cunning tactic (going beyond what was legitimate) that also emerged intuitively, depending on the circumstances. We knew what was not supposed to be, and what we were going to achieve, God knows...' Renata Galtseva, *Pamiatnoe* (Tsentr gumanitarnykh initsiativ, 2018), 111–130. See also: Nelli Motroshilova, *Otechestvennaia filosofiiia 50–80-kh godov XX v. i zapadnaia mysl'* (Akademicheskii proekt, 2012), 34–47; Viacheslav Shestakov, *Pod"emy i padeniia intellektualizma v Rossii: Moi vospominaniia* (Nestor-Istoriia, 2015), 44–50.

<sup>46</sup> For example: Viktor Garadzha, "Religiia," in *Bol'shaia Sovetskaia Entsiklopediia*, 3rd ed., vol. 21 (Moscow, 1975), 629.

<sup>47</sup> Sergei Averintsev, "Novyi zavet," in *Filosofskaia entsiklopediia*, vol. 4 (Sovetskaia entsiklopediia, 1967), 89.

<sup>48</sup> Iurii Popov, philosopher, Averintsev's friend and editor, interview date: 07.12.2024.

<sup>49</sup> Sergei Averintsev, "Poslaniia Pavla," in *Filosofskaia entsiklopediia*, vol. 4 (Sovetskaia entsiklopediia, 1967), 326.

<sup>50</sup> Sergei Averintsev, "Khristianstvo," in *Filosofskaia entsiklopediia*, vol. 5 (Sovetskaia entsiklopediia, 1970), 447–451.

<sup>51</sup> Alekseev, "Vmeste s Averintsevym," 6.

monks and priests studied [theology] with his articles and books.’<sup>52</sup> In turn, Soviet specialists in scientific atheism accused him of clericalism [*popovshchina*], apparently troubled not only by the ideological transgressions but also by what they perceived as an intrusion into their professional domain, which threatened their control over the discourse as well as the royalties for entries on religious topics.<sup>53</sup> After the Soviet collapse, Averintsev recalled that these accusations drew, among other things, on foreign reviews of his texts:

I remember a very amusing misunderstanding of the fifth volume of the *Philosophical Encyclopaedia* by one Western reader. When the volume was published, and the scandals around it reached the ideological commission of the Central Committee, a translation of a review written by a Munich Jesuit became a necessary addendum to every denunciation [...] Imagine: why would a person in Munich want to read the Soviet *Philosophical Encyclopaedia*? To understand Soviet politics, for what else? [...] And so, the honourable reviewer writes that so and so, while no one notices anything, the Soviet government’s attitudes towards religion and philosophical idealism have taken a radical turn, and urges to pay attention to the fifth volume.<sup>54</sup>

Averintsev referred here to an article written in 1972 by the German philosopher and scholar of Russian philosophy Peter Ehlen, ‘The New Soviet Philosophical Encyclopaedia. New attitudes of Soviet philosophers toward theology.’ Ehlen examines the entry ‘Christianity,’ points out its ‘clearly theological tone,’ and suggests that such ‘a remarkably new appreciation of Christian belief’ in an official publication may indicate a shift in Soviet

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<sup>52</sup> Olga Sedakova, “Vstrecha svobodnoi kul'tury i pravoslavnoi traditsii v 70-80-e gody,” paper presented at Conference “Tikhvinskie obrazovatel'nye chteniia,” Tikhvin, 2016, <https://www.grad-petrov.ru/broadcast/kazalos-net-nikakih-pregrad-k-tomu-chtoby-gonimaya-tserkov-vstretilas-s-gonimoi-kulturoj>.

<sup>53</sup> Iurii Popov, “Stat'i S.S. Averintseva i sud'ba entsiklopedii v Rossii,” in *Lichnost' i traditsiia. Averintsevskie chteniia*, ed. Konstantin Sigov (Dukh i Litera, 2005).

<sup>54</sup> Sergei Averintsev, “Slovar' protiv 'Izhi v alfavitnom poriadke,’” in *Sofiia-Logos. Slovar'* (Dukh i litera, 2006), 841–842.

policies towards religion — ‘a decisive stride from “ideological conflict” to fruitful dialogue.’<sup>55</sup> Averintsev mentioned this interpretation of his work as a curious anecdote not only because the assumption that he expressed in his entries a new turn of the ‘party line’ ludicrously contradicted reality, but also because the Western scholar had drastically misunderstood the mechanics of Soviet intellectual production. The question was how it was possible for a ‘clearly theological’ entry to appear in such an official publication as the *Philosophical Encyclopaedia*. For Ehlen, the obvious answer seemed to be that this entry must have reflected a change in the Soviet official position on religion. In reality, however, the possibility of such publications was determined by the editors’ ability to act as mediators between the author and the institutions of ideological control, and by their skill in finding compromises or manipulating the publication process.<sup>56</sup>

Iurii Popov, editor of the *Philosophical Encyclopaedia*, who worked with Averintsev, described these practices:

The entry ‘Orthodoxy’ had to be sent [to the editor-in-chief Fedor Konstantinov]. I practically mutilated it: I crossed out almost every other phrase and wrote something in the margins. It was such a mess that I could hardly make sense of it myself. There was another trick — we asked Pavel Kurochkin, the Deputy Director of the Institute of Scientific Atheism, who studied Orthodoxy in the USSR, to write the last 20 lines. And we removed Averintsev’s name. Because we knew how Konstantinov would read — he always checked who the author was, and if it was a reliable person, there was no need to read thoroughly. [...]

We also had to figure out who from the Institute of Scientific Atheism would read [Averintsev’s entries]. It was a peculiar mix: there were people of the old guard, from professional atheists [*bezbozhniki*] of the 1920s–1930s, alongside young ones who

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<sup>55</sup> Peter Ehlen, “The New Soviet Philosophical Encyclopedia. New Attitudes of Soviet Philosophers toward Theology,” *Studies in Soviet Thought* 12, no. 4 (1972): 390.

<sup>56</sup> Polly Jones, *Revolution Rekindled. The Writers and Readers of Late Soviet Biography* (Oxford University Press, 2019), 66–99.

were just making their careers and tried to stay away from scandals, and they just made some particular comments, without bashing. And I had an agent of sorts there who I had once asked to write the entry 'Atheism' for the *Encyclopaedia* (he was grateful as he was young but was trusted with such an important entry), and I was asking him: who is on duty today? And if it was someone young, I went to the director and said that it was urgent. This way, the entries were vetted by the Institute of Scientific Atheism. [...]

In the fifth volume, there was another procedure with 'Christianity.' We asked Iurii Levada to write the last section in the spirit of the sociology of religion. Well, he understood that it was a 'front.' I think we removed Averintsev's name as well. We only put it back when the volume was sent to the printing house.<sup>57</sup>

These editorial tricks helped secure the publication of Averintsev's entries, and the backlash that followed their appearance was downplayed by measures taken by philosophical functionaries seeking official recognition of the *Encyclopaedia*'s success. In February 1971, soon after the release of the last volume, Lev Suvorov, a specialist in Marxist–Leninist philosophy, wrote a positive review in *Pravda*, commending the 'great editorial work' and faithfulness to Lenin's precepts.<sup>58</sup> This kind of article in the main Soviet newspaper largely removed any scope for publicly criticising the *Encyclopaedia*.<sup>59</sup> According to Iurii Popov, the scandal around Averintsev's entries was significant, but took place 'behind the scenes,' limited to the reprimands [*raznos*] within the editorial office.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Iurii Popov, philosopher, Averintsev's friend and editor, interview date: 07.12.2024.

<sup>58</sup> Lev Suvorov, "Zavershen bol'shoi trud," *Pravda*, February 16, 1971: 2.

<sup>59</sup> Iurii Popov told me in an interview that the author of this article was Fedor Konstantinov. It is a mistake in letter but not in spirit. It is quite likely that Konstantinov, who was the Head of a department in *Pravda* in the second half of the 1930s and in the 1960s, the Head of the Institute of Philosophy, where Suvorov worked, arranged this publication.

<sup>60</sup> Iurii Popov, philosopher, Averintsev's friend and editor, interview date: 07.12.2024.

In this regard, the *Philosophical Encyclopaedia*, whose authors, in Renata Galtseva's words, 'cooked two soups in one casserole,'<sup>61</sup> was very similar to the *Fiery Revolutionaries* book series analysed by Polly Jones. She remarks that since *Politizdat* (as well as the *Soviet Encyclopaedia* publishing house) was at the very centre of Soviet publishing and propaganda, the tension between its various functions was especially acute:

It appeared as a source of financial and reputational security, albeit entailing moral and aesthetic compromises; as a source of propaganda narratives; as a site of potential political critique and literary distinction; as a community whose values were distinct from the Soviet mainstream and closer to those of the erstwhile thaw; and as a space contaminated and oppressed by ideological interference.<sup>62</sup>

As in the series analysed by Jones, the *Philosophical Encyclopaedia* was simultaneously subject to the influence of official and alternative (albeit not dissident) values and practices. Collaboration between authors and editors resulted in the development of complex and creative tactics for approaching the authoritative discourse, not limited to either unconditional acceptance or rejection but aimed at expanding the limits of the possible, including rather risky attempts 'to push through texts that seemed impossible to publish otherwise.'<sup>63</sup>

Sergei Averintsev and Iurii Popov understood the risk that the work on those entries entailed.<sup>64</sup> They accepted it, driven by their religious commitment; while working on the *Encyclopaedia*, they became so close that in 1973, Popov organised the baptism of Averintsev and his wife, Natalia, in the flat of Milena Semiz, Head of the library at the Andrei

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<sup>61</sup> Galtseva, *Pamiatnoe*.

<sup>62</sup> Polly Jones, *Revolution Rekindled. The Writers and Readers of Late Soviet Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 69.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid*, 96.

<sup>64</sup> See Averintsev's own account: 'And then a whole picaresque novel began. Iura Popov asked me to write an entry on Christianity. I said to him: "Iura, if you are mad enough to ask me for such an entry, I would be very ashamed if I were not mad enough to write it."' Averintsev, "Slovar' protiv 'Izhi v alfavitnom poriadke,'" 841.

Rublev Museum of Old Russian Art.<sup>65</sup> But they could probably foresee the intellectual success that justified the risk. The strategy of breaking with official Marxism and promoting alternative values (sometimes more openly, sometimes less so) proved successful at a very early stage in Averintsev's career. As historian Nina Braginskaia tells me in the interview, in the late 1960s, Averintsev, who had just started his academic career, already had many admirers among the educated public.<sup>66</sup>

Unlike Losev, who sought to redefine Marxist concepts and use them in his intellectual work, Averintsev avoided even ritual references to Marx and Engels, leaving it to his editor to resort to different tricks and ploys to publish his ideologically problematic texts. That was why these texts made such a strong impression on some Soviet readers, who saw them as new and exciting (or, to use Sergei Dovlatov's words, 'unheard-of').<sup>67</sup> This possibility of writing (almost) disregarding the demands of censorship, according to Vladimir Bibikhin's notes, sparked Losev's irritation and jealousy. In a note dated 30 May 1975, Bibikhin records that during a heated discussion, Losev claimed that it was he, not Averintsev, who 'openly says what he thinks,' and that this was why he was not published or invited to conferences. Averintsev, says Losev, is accepted, 'because Averintsev is pushy, and I am not pushy. Averintsev is a great literary talent, but he is even more of a pushy talent.'<sup>68</sup> The word 'pushy' [*probivnoi*] here refers to Averintsev's ability to 'rub shoulders in publishing houses', to

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<sup>65</sup> Iurii Popov, philosopher, Averintsev's friend and editor, interview date: 07.12.2024. See also: *O Sergee Averintseve (k 85-letiiu) / Iurii Popov, sviashchennik Georgii Kochetkov / Nauki o cheloveke*, (Sviato-Filaretovskii institut, 2023), 01:55:41, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EBAFxl2jMnA>.

<sup>66</sup> Nina Braginskaia, historian and philologist, Averintsev's colleague, interview date: 28.12.2024.

<sup>67</sup> One of my informants, Alexey Muravyev, Averintsev's doctoral student in 1992–1995, told me about a similar effect: 'Once, I was on the underground (in 1986 or 1987, I think), reading *Poetics of Early Byzantine Literature*. It's just a crummy paperback. And next to me, there is a bloke, looking vaguely lumpen, who suddenly starts tilting his head and reading from behind my shoulder. "What is this book? Tell me, what kind of book is this? I've never read anything like it! It's something amazing! I should definitely..." The text somehow instantly mesmerised this man [...] Apparently, he had some kind of insight. The effect was created by the combination of a very dense, rich intellectual text and special style as Averintsev mastered various stylistic techniques, including the style of the Scriptures.' Alexey Muravyev, historian, Averintsev's doctoral student, interview date: 05.12.2024.

<sup>68</sup> Vladimir Bibikhin, *Aleksei Fedorovich Losev. Sergei Sergeevich Averintsev* (Moscow: Institut filosofii, teologii i istorii sv. Fomy, 2006), 236.

establish contacts with editors and tell them what they want to hear to secure publications. Therefore, Losev interpreted the fact that Averintsev was published and invited ‘everywhere’ as deriving not from his academic prowess but his social skills, insisting on his, Losev’s, intellectual superiority: ‘Averintsev carelessly takes from me and does not even cite me. It’s stealing.’<sup>69</sup> Despite Losev’s obvious bias or, as Bibikhin writes, ‘an impotent irritation that he hardly understood himself,’<sup>70</sup> there seems to be some truth in his words.

Averintsev’s intellectual success required not only talent and intense work but also the accumulation of significant social capital. Thanks to the help of his senior colleagues,<sup>71</sup> Averintsev managed to receive the Lenin Komsomol Prize in 1968 for his dissertation on Plutarch, which, according to Olga Sedakova, served thereafter as a ‘security certificate,’ protecting him from accusations of ideological unreliability.<sup>72</sup> Historian Vera Tolz, Dmitrii Likhachev’s granddaughter, who has known Averintsev since the mid-1970s, suggested in the interview that Likhachev helped to publish Averintsev’s works ‘as they were,’ so that, thanks to this patronage, he no longer needed to delegate to editors the task of ‘pushing through’ his texts.<sup>73</sup> In reality, Averintsev was by no means the fool that he played in front of officials, but neither was he an otherworldly figure, however demonstratively he broke with the Soviet symbolic order. The successful realisation of his intellectual strategy was possible precisely because of his masterful navigation of Soviet academia and his ability to make use of its informal mechanisms, securing editors’ assistance and influential patrons’ support.

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid, 239–240.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid, 240.

<sup>71</sup> It is not quite clear who these senior colleagues were. Olga Sedakova simply told me that ‘his senior colleagues and teachers cared about him.’ Olga Sedakova, poet and scholar, Averintsev’s friend and colleague, interview date: 09.11.2024. Nina Braginskaia said that ‘Eval’d Il’enkov played a big role in that he received it [the prize].’ Nina Braginskaia, historian and philologist, Averintsev’s colleague, interview date: 28.12.2024.

<sup>72</sup> ‘It saved him from a lot of trouble. Let’s say he gave a paper on a Byzantine Church Father. They say the author is a winner of the Lenin Komsomol Prize. And all is well.’ Olga Sedakova, poet and scholar, Averintsev’s friend and colleague, interview date: 09.11.2024.

<sup>73</sup> Vera Tolz, historian, Dmitrii Likhachev’s granddaughter, interview date: 05.11.2024. She also notes that ‘it was only possible in Moscow, which was far more liberal than any other city in the Soviet Union.’

## Athens and Jerusalem: Averintsev's Approach to Culture

Like Losev, Averintsev did not write on cultural theory specifically; yet he was by no means an average philologist, limiting himself to academic specialisation in a particular author or literary tradition. Not only did he possess exceptional erudition and a wide range of research interests, but he also sought to inscribe any phenomenon he analysed — be it Romanos the Melodist's religious hymns or Carl Jung's theory of archetypes — into the European cultural tradition. Sedakova emphasises this core feature of his approach:

This [the book 'Poets,' a collection of essays about Virgil, Ephrem the Syrian, Vasilii Zhukovskii, Viacheslav Ivanov, Herman Hesse and others] is not really 'a portrait in an interior' (that, say, a portrait of Zhukovskii among his Russian and European contemporaries and immediate predecessors would be); Averintsev is much less concerned with such an interior than an 'ordinary' philologist, the one known under the unpleasant name of 'a specialist in...'. It is rather a portrait of the author within the whole universe of culture, and most of all, in relation to its most general foundations. Averintsev's method does not cease to be deductive, as his descent to detail begins from the heights of very general meanings, which usually the specialist philologist does not possess [...] I am referring to philosophical, theological, and general anthropological premises.<sup>74</sup>

Indeed, Averintsev was concerned less with the immediate historical context of any given phenomenon than with its relations to the European tradition as a whole, considering these relations essential for understanding its true meaning. Of course, postulating the wholeness of European culture was itself a philosophical move. This approach went far beyond the limits of literary scholarship and made it possible for other scholars, such as Alexander

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<sup>74</sup> Sedakova, "Rassuzhdenie o metode," 149–150.

Dobrokhoto, a philosopher and Averintsev's colleague at MSU in the 1990s, to present Averintsev as 'a philosopher of culture.'<sup>75</sup>

Averintsev did not call himself a philosopher; however, he radically broadened the definition of philology by endowing it with the universalism of the epistemological claims usually made by philosophers and by ascribing moral significance to scholarly work. In the entry 'Philology,' published first in the specialised *Brief Literary Encyclopaedia* [*Kratkaia literaturnaia entsiklopediia*] and then, with minor changes, in the *Bol'shaia Sovetskaia*, the main Soviet encyclopaedia, he maintains that 'ideally, the philologist is obliged to know, in the most literal sense of the word, everything'<sup>76</sup> — since anything may be required to clarify the text under examination. This expansionist approach is similar to Losev's stance, who, 'as a philosopher, had the right to invade any field of knowledge.'<sup>77</sup> Averintsev then defines philology as the 'service of understanding,' and asserts that it fulfils a universal human task of 'understanding another person (and another culture, another historical period).' Finally, he treats philology as a morally important practice, stating that at its core lie preservation, transmission, and commentary on canonical texts regarded as unconditional values ('Dante's works for Italians, J. W. Goethe's for Germans, A. S. Pushkin's for Russians').<sup>78</sup> Thus, philology, much like philosophy, turns out to be not merely scholarly knowledge, but a 'service' that deals with human nature and the foundations of culture. Defined in this way, philology is transformed into a universal hermeneutics which, as Averintsev wrote in his article 'Praise for Philology' [*Pokhval'noe slovo filologii*], explains the 'meaning of culture,' expressed in words and texts. The difference between philology and philosophy here is

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<sup>75</sup> Aleksandr Dobrokhoto, "Averintsev kak filosof kul'tury," in *Averintsevskie chteniia* (Izdatel'stvo Moskovskogo universiteta, 2008), 58–67.

<sup>76</sup> Averintsev, "Filologiiia," 453.

<sup>77</sup> Aza Takho-Godi, *Losev* (Molodaia gvardiia, 2007), 381.

<sup>78</sup> Averintsev, "Filologiiia," 455.

reduced to the fact that the former cannot stray too far from its textual sources ('Word and text must be more important to true philology than the most brilliant conception').<sup>79</sup>

In offering this definition of philology in the encyclopaedias, Averintsev de facto presented his own intellectual practice, which combined professional scholarly work with public lectures for educated audiences, as the disciplinary standard. Again, very similarly to Losev, he rejected, on the one hand, a straightforward interpretation of texts that did not require specialised knowledge and, on the other hand, the formalisation of philological knowledge, which overlooked its human dimension. This double rejection implicitly presented his research attitude as a normative model — a reasonable third position that mitigated the extremes of both Soviet Marxism and structuralism. However, Averintsev seems to have been aware that sometimes his bold generalisations may have been perceived by his colleagues, 'ordinary philologists,' as Sedakova calls them, as a violation of disciplinary conventions. That is why he occasionally made attempts to justify his intellectual *modus operandi* with explanations such as 'if we allow ourselves a view of things that is impermissible in philological analyses of isolated phenomena but inevitably becomes part of the game as soon as we overview historical and cultural eras in their integrity...'<sup>80</sup> Yet to 'overview historical and cultural eras in their integrity' implied stepping into the territory of the philosophy of culture (or 'culturology').

In the 1970s, Averintsev used the terms 'poetics' or 'aesthetics' for this type of intellectual work. In the academic year 1971/72, he taught a course on Byzantine aesthetics at the Faculty of History of Moscow State University, which eventually developed into his seminal book *Poetics of Early Byzantine Literature*. The term 'aesthetics,' explicitly borrowed from Losev, allowed him to justify the possibility of exploring the 'wholeness' of culture through philosophical (and, in Averintsev's case, also theological and literary) texts:

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<sup>79</sup> Sergei Averintsev, "Pokhval'noe slovo filologii," *Iunost'*, no. 1, (Moscow), 1969: 99.

<sup>80</sup> Sergei Averintsev, "Grecheskaia 'literatura' i blizhnevostochnaia 'slovesnost'" (protivostoianie i vstrecha dvukh tvorcheskikh printsipov)," in *Ritorika i istoki evropeiskoi literaturnoi traditsii* (Shkola "Iazyki russkoi kul'tury," 1996), 16.

The researcher does not restrict himself to the formal selection of material, but to the mode of studying this material. Ontology is a subject of analysis, but only as long as it is directly rooted in the vital experience of the historical period; cosmology is a subject too, but as a plastic representation of an emotionally inhabited universe; ethics as well, but insofar as it provides illustrative and expressive images of the morally compelled. [...] The organisation of bygone spiritual life, taken as a whole, is the object of one's professional occupation and concern. It is precisely the wholeness of the 'world-view style' that should attract one's special attention.<sup>81</sup>

This kind of radical expansion of the research field allowed Averintsev to exploit his impressive erudition, working with a wide variety of texts and establishing unexpected links between seemingly unrelated cultural phenomena. Moreover, Averintsev appears to have used the term 'aesthetics' to avoid ideological criticism of his blatantly non-Marxist approach to the history of Western European and Byzantine culture. Historian Nina Braginskaia, who attended Averintsev's lectures, told me in the interview that 'aesthetics' was 'a harmless word,' i.e., 'a sign that he was studying trifles, pretty ornaments, something like that. In reality, these were lectures on the spiritual culture of Western Europe, Antiquity, and Byzantium.'<sup>82</sup>

However, in the title of his book, *Poetics of Early Byzantine Literature*, Averintsev used the more traditional philological term 'poetics.'<sup>83</sup> Explaining this title in the introduction, Averintsev did not simply mention Likhachev's *Poetics of Old Russian Literature* [*Poetika drevnerusskoi literatury*, 1967], but reverently emphasised the continuity between the books.<sup>84</sup> Perhaps the use of this term as an homage to Likhachev reflected a change in

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<sup>81</sup> Averintsev, *Poetika rannevizantiiskoi literatury*, 38–41.

<sup>82</sup> Nina Braginskaia, historian and philologist, Averintsev's colleague, interview date: 28.12.2024.

<sup>83</sup> The term 'poetics,' originating with Aristotle, was introduced into Russian philology by Aleksandr Veselovskii and Aleksandr Potebnia in the second half of the nineteenth century.

<sup>84</sup> 'We could limit ourselves to stating that we use the word "poetics" in the same sense as it has in the title of D.S. Likhachev's book *Poetics of Old Russian Literature*. The title of our work, as the reader has already guessed, is imitative, and this imitation is intentional; it should serve as an indication of the book's genre.

Averintsev's relationships with both scholars in the mid-1970s: while his relationship with Losev noticeably cooled,<sup>85</sup> Likhachev became his academic patron, helping him with his career. Vera Tolz told me in the interview that she had met Averintsev around that time, when he had come to visit Likhachev. She confirms that Likhachev contributed to Averintsev's career advancement:

Yes, Likhachev was his [Averintsev's] patron. Of course, he was young enough to be his son. Intellectually, Likhachev valued him very much, so they were on equal terms, but Likhachev promoted him. [...] Likhachev was the patron of people like Averintsev, brilliant scholars who were not openly anti-Soviet but not Soviet either. This was one of Likhachev's roles. He had a normal relationship with Zinaida Udaltsova, the main Soviet Byzantologist.<sup>86</sup> And he could lobby Averintsev and others, so that at least they would not be harassed or questioned about what they were publishing. Because Byzantine culture is religious, Christian, and the discussion of the Christian foundations of Byzantine culture did not quite fit into the Soviet paradigm.<sup>87</sup>

In any case, replacing 'aesthetics' with 'poetics' did not change Averintsev's approach. Apparently, Likhachev understood perfectly well that the change of term did not reflect a methodological shift but rather served as a manifestation of loyalty to the academic patron. In 1980, when Averintsev defended his book as a doctoral (second) dissertation, Likhachev became his official opponent and wrote a complimentary review, specifically remarking that

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*Poetics of Old Russian Literature* is a classic example of an academic genre. Our book is an attempt to work in the same genre, but on a different material.' Averintsev, *Poetika rannevizantiiskoi literatury*, 9.

<sup>85</sup> Gasan Gusejnov, Losev's former secretary and Averintsev's colleague in the Sector of Ancient Literature at the Institute of World Literature in the 1980s, shared this impression in the interview. Vladimir Bibikhin also mentions this in the note on 01.12.1975, reporting Losev's words that 'Averintsev has become too full of himself and doesn't come [to him] anymore.' Bibikhin, *Aleksei Fedorovich Losev. Sergei Sergeevich Averintsev*, 246.

<sup>86</sup> In the 1970s-1980s, she was the Head of the Sector of History of Byzantium at the Institute of World History of the Academy of Sciences, and the Director of that Institute in 1980-1987.

<sup>87</sup> Vera Tolz, historian, Dmitrii Likhachev's granddaughter, interview date: 05.11.2024.

In his book, S.S. Averintsev also recognises essentially only one poetics, philosophical at its core. Although he defines poetics as ‘a system of working principles of an author, or a literary school, or an entire literary epoch,’ it turns out later that what he calls ‘a system of working principles’ is a system of the entire worldview and world-behaviour.<sup>88</sup>

Therefore, for Averintsev, the terms ‘poetics’ and ‘aesthetics’ encompassed a special kind of philological and philosophical work aimed at reconstructing the semantic structure of (European) culture, i.e. the system of symbols and concepts presented in philosophical, theological and literary texts, and establishing the normative foundation of a certain worldview. I will now analyse this research approach in *Poetics of Early Byzantine Literature*, a book that appears to focus on the creative principles of Byzantine literature in the 4th to 7th centuries, but, like Losev’s *Aesthetics of the Renaissance*, discussed in the previous chapter, it is also a philosophical reflection on the very foundations of European culture.

*Poetics of Early Byzantine Literature* is the most comprehensive example of Averintsev’s intellectual work. Having developed from his lectures of the early 1970s, the book retains some important features of his lecturing style.<sup>89</sup> Firstly, it is divided into chapters not as much connected thematically, as united around the consistency of the author’s approach to culture.<sup>90</sup> Secondly, it abounds in digressions, unexpected analogies, and detours into other subjects. Finally, it addresses the reader as a listener or even an interlocutor, who shares not only author’s research interests but also his aesthetic and moral judgements. The latter is

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<sup>88</sup> Dmitrii Likhachev, “Otzyv na rabotu S.S. Averintseva ‘Rannevizantiiskaia poetika,’” in *Proshloe — budushchemu: stat’i i ocherki* (Nauka, 1985), 352.

<sup>89</sup> See more on that in the next section.

<sup>90</sup> This was partly due to the fact that for this book, Averintsev collected the texts of already published articles. Nikolai Shaburov, a historian, who was Averintsev’s admirer in the 1970s, told me in an interview that he felt excited when ‘Poetics’ came out, but was disappointed, for when he started reading, it seemed to him that ‘the sum of the articles was richer than the book.’ Nikolai Shaburov, historian, Losev’s secretary and listener of Averintsev’s lectures; interview date: 17.11.2024. Indeed, some fragments in the book’s version are reworked compared to the articles. Cf., for example, the chapter ‘Humiliation and Dignity of Man’ and the article ‘At the Crossroads of Literary Traditions’: Averintsev, *Poetika rannevizantiiskoi literatury*, 62–89; Sergei Averintsev, “Na perekrestke literaturnykh traditsii,” in *Religiia i literatura* (Hermitage, 1981), 34–67.

particularly important: when Averintsev writes that Byzantine authors used rhetorical embellishments ‘more than would be to our taste’<sup>91</sup> or that when reading texts saturated with erotic metaphors, ‘we experience a slight nausea,’<sup>92</sup> he seeks to elicit the atmosphere of a personal confidential conversation, or, as he himself says, ‘a concealed and passionate collusion, both with the author about whom I wrote and with the reader for whom I did it.’<sup>93</sup>

Olga Sedakova points out that late Soviet readers were especially drawn to this style:

[It is still possible today] to appreciate how unexpected, how contrary to everything, this verbal gesture of interlocution, of welcoming and orderly communication with the Other as ‘one’s own’ (‘one’s’ author, ‘one’s’ reader), appeared among the public texts of that time.<sup>94</sup>

Thus, Averintsev’s rhetoric and intonation aimed to form a community of ‘their own’ [*svoi*] around his lectures and texts. He managed to transfer this intonation of confidential and intimate conversation — very common in small unofficial groups — into both his texts and lectures, attracting a broader audience of readers and listeners who shared his cultural sensibilities: an interest in Orthodoxy, a ‘longing for world culture,’ and a fascination with the ‘imaginary West’ as an alternative to official Soviet culture. Eleonory Gilburd shows that these sensibilities were, at least partially, shaped by the experience of Soviet childhood reading, as ‘the imagination travel[ed] in the footsteps of books,’<sup>95</sup> transforming European cities into familiar places.<sup>96</sup> Of course, this version of the ‘imaginary West’ differed drastically

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<sup>91</sup> Averintsev, *Poetika rannevizantiiskoi literatury*, 61.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid, 251.

<sup>93</sup> Sergei Averintsev, “Nemnogo lichnogo,” in *Poety* (Shkola “Iazyki russkoi kul'tury,” 1996), 15.

<sup>94</sup> Sedakova, “Rassuzhdenie o metode,” 164.

<sup>95</sup> Eleonory Gilburd, *To See Paris and Die: The Soviet Lives of Western Culture* (The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2018), 268.

<sup>96</sup> For example: ‘I would hardly describe the little town of Calw in my article on Hesse at such length if I did not have a reason to believe that I was destined to see it only in a photograph in the album by Bernhard Zeller — and that my reader could not see it in any form at all... “The treasures of world culture” — aside from what others rationed out to us and already chewed with their teeth — were indeed treasures for us in the most

from the American mass-culture version described by Alexei Yurchak (Western movies, jazz and rock 'n' roll, 'branded' items, etc.). It was highbrow West European culture, appealing to an educated audience — that is, the world of classical literary and philosophical texts, German academic culture, Catholicism with its Gothic architecture and Gregorian chant, and so on. There were, however, obvious correspondences between these two versions of the 'imaginary West.' Just as not understanding the English lyrics of rock songs was not a problem for their Soviet listeners (moreover, as Yurchak notes, 'there was a special meaning in the fact that the words of the songs were incomprehensible and the performance sounded foreign'<sup>97</sup>), the Latin address that Averintsev delivered at the celebration of Losev's 80th anniversary at the House of Scientists in Moscow enthralled the listeners because it instantly transported them into another cultural world, even if they did not fully understand it.<sup>98</sup>

We can hardly speak of Averintsev's research 'method' in the strict sense of the word. Olga Sedakova and Aleksandr Dobrokhotoy are correct to argue that Averintsev did not create any novel conceptual apparatus, introduce new terminology, or develop a research algorithm.<sup>99</sup> Unlike Losev, he did not seek to produce laconic, definitive formulas to encapsulate the essence of the phenomenon in question; on the contrary, he often merely posed a question or formulated a hypothesis. It would be more accurate to talk about Averintsev's specific approach: that is, a consistent pattern in his intellectual work, principles for selecting sources, defining the research subject, and structuring the argument.

Firstly, Averintsev analysed cultural norms and ideals postulated in classical philosophical, theological, and literary texts. Even when considering practices of corporal punishment in

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literal, etymological sense of the word: what was hidden from us, deliberately concealed.' Averintsev, "Nemnogo lichnogo," 15–16.

<sup>97</sup> Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More*, 374.

<sup>98</sup> Bibikhin, *Aleksei Fedorovich Losev. Sergei Sergeevich Averintsev*, 257–258; Alexis Berelowitch, "O kul'te lichnosti i ego posledstviakh," *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie*, no. 76 (2005), <https://m.polit.ru/article/2006/03/10/berelovich/>.

<sup>99</sup> Sedakova, "Rassuzhdenie o metode," 159; Dobrokhotoy, "Averintsev kak filosof kul'tury."

ancient Greece and the Middle East, Averintsev mentioned such sources as legal codes only in passing, but analysed in great detail the motivations of Homer's heroes, the bodily metaphors of the Old Testament, and the image of Socrates in Plato's *Apologia*.<sup>100</sup> These and similar classical texts have paramount importance in his study because they served for him as a means of accessing the 'system of world-understanding' of a given historical era. Particularly illustrative in this respect is the chapter 'Concord in Discord' [*Soglasie v nesoglasii*], in which the peculiarities of Romanos the Melodist's poetry are explained through the 'universal forms of medieval thinking.'<sup>101</sup> These 'forms of thinking' or 'structures of meaning' — that is, the core symbols and concepts characterising the worldview of a historical period — were Averintsev's primary concern.

Secondly, Averintsev worked on two planes, which he called the 'arithmetic' and the 'higher mathematics' of humanitarian knowledge (though the transition between them is not always obvious for the reader, to put it mildly). On the first plane, he describes and examines historically determined cultural phenomena (such as, for example, didactic poetry within the genre system of ancient literature).<sup>102</sup> This type of work is guided by the principle of historicism, which supposes the suspension of aesthetic or moral judgment and the analysis of these cultural phenomena in their historical context. On the second plane, Averintsev, comparing different 'types of worldviews,' segues into the analysis of universal ideas. Although these ideas always appear in historically specific forms, he claims that theoretical contemplation makes it possible to discover a permanent, integral meaning behind them (for example, he considers it acceptable to speak of Christianity in general, across its various historical incarnations<sup>103</sup>). Identifying these 'universally valid' meanings

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<sup>100</sup> Averintsev, *Poetika rannevizantiiskoi literatury*, 64–76.

<sup>101</sup> 'Let us remember once again that the universal form of medieval thinking and perception is the symbol, which neither conflates the object and its meaning (as it happened in paganism) nor separates them (as it was hinted at in iconoclasm and finalized in the rationalism of early modernity) but holds them together "unmerged and unseparated." The aesthetic unmergedness and inseparability of the stance and refrain, their opposition and conjugation, is a clear correspondence to this.' Ibid, 225.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid, 155–157.

<sup>103</sup> Averintsev, "K uiasneniiu smysla nadpisi nad konkhoy tsestral'noi apsidy Sofii Kievskoi," 549–551.

requires not only rational understanding but also intuitive recognition. Averintsev consciously seeks to elicit the joy of such recognition in his ideal ('his own') reader. For example, when he recounts a Talmudic story of a Jewish scribe burned by Roman soldiers, he clearly alludes to the famous phrase 'manuscripts don't burn,' from Mikhail Bulgakov's novel *Master and Margarita*: 'Of course, this image expresses the universal human idea that a book can be burned, but the word written in this book is immortal...'<sup>104</sup> This was a significant allusion, considering that, as Stephen Lovell argues, in the 1960s and 1970s the statement 'manuscripts don't burn' served as a 'metaphysical rallying-cry for a generation of the Soviet intelligentsia,' interpreted as a declaration of historical optimism, a belief that, eventually, good must overcome.<sup>105</sup>

Thirdly, Averintsev worked with broad concepts such as 'medieval consciousness,' 'Christian teachings,' 'ancient Greek idealism,' 'Middle Eastern didactics,' and so on. Nina Braginskaia told me in the interview that this approach often sparked criticism from his more cautious colleagues:

He already had a general picture of whatever it was, and from that, he proceeded down to the facts that supported that picture. This is a lecturer's rather than a researcher's approach. Averintsev did little specific research (but it was always impressive); he had the rare ability to synthesise a general picture, which he developed very early. [...] But if there is a big pattern, there are always exceptions to it. And those who favoured immaculately precise statements, which could be made only on very particular material, always found in his work what they considered sloppiness, errors, and unjustified generalisations. Realising that they didn't have the same scope, they sought to bring down a person who was flying high.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> Averintsev, *Poetika rannevizantiiskoi literatury*, 194.

<sup>105</sup> Stephen Lovell, "Bulgakov as Soviet Culture," *The Slavonic and East European Review* 76, no. 1 (1998): 42.

<sup>106</sup> Nina Braginskaia, historian and philologist, Averintsev's colleague, interview date: 28.12.2024.

Averintsev's 'high flight' of generalisations resulted in hypostatisation, that is, in presenting abstract categories as active historical agents — forces of culture that acted independently of the consciousness and will of people. He constantly used turns of phrase such as 'In Greece, literature first realised itself as literature,'<sup>107</sup> or 'Greek historiography, in Herodotus and Thucydides, did not know the chronological architectonics operating with millennia.'<sup>108</sup> These statements do not concern the works of any particular author, but instead seek to reveal fundamental cultural principles (the latter example is not about Herodotus or Thucydides, but about Greek historiography as a whole). The exploration of these principles, the deep undercurrents that shaped various cultural forms, elicited the scepticism of some of his colleagues and the admiration of his audience.

Fourthly, his analysis of cultural principles was always comparative and relational. Unlike Losev, who focused on the core principle of a certain culture, Averintsev emphasised points of intersection, opposition or interaction between different cultures. He identified contrasts, following the formula A is typical for culture X, while B is typical for culture Y, and in some cases further traced the synthesis of A and B.<sup>109</sup> Juxtaposing different cultures allowed him to highlight their distinctive features, and studying cultural synthesis — such as, for instance, the mosaic depiction of Christ on the chariot of Helios — opened up a way to understand 'the logic of cultural forms.'<sup>110</sup> Following Averintsev himself, who titled one of his articles 'At the Crossroads of Literary Traditions' [*Na perekrestke literaturnykh traditsii*], scholars sometimes define this aspect of his approach as 'the principle of the crossroads.'<sup>111</sup> The use of this principle explains, for example, why the book on Byzantine literature discusses

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<sup>107</sup> Averintsev, "Grecheskaia 'literatura' i blizhnevostochnaia 'slovesnost'" (protivostoianie i vstrecha dvukh tvorcheskikh printsipov)," 15.

<sup>108</sup> Averintsev, *Poetika rannevizantiiskoi literatury*, 96.

<sup>109</sup> For example: 'For the classical Greco-Roman worldview, a man is, so to speak, a citizen of the cosmos, enjoying his inalienable, albeit limited, civil rights, while for such spiritual movements as Christianity, as well as Gnosticism and Manichaeism, he is more like a king's son, suffering in foreign lands a disgrace inconsistent with his rank.' Ibid, 84.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid, 249.

<sup>111</sup> Sedakova, "Rassuzhdenie o metode," 173; Dobrokhoto, "Averintsev kak filosof kul'tury."

ancient philosophy and mythology, the Hebrew concept of time, medieval Russian homiletics, and even Dante's poetry. Averintsev's approach, allowing him to take advantage of his vast erudition, required that any phenomenon should be examined through its similarity to or difference from others and, ideally, should be conceived within the 'structure of meaning' of three thousand years of European cultural history.

Finally, for Averintsev, the significance of cultural research was not limited to knowledge production. He was less categorical than Losev in his judgement of particular phenomena or entire historical periods, but he made it clear to his reader that the very fact of gaining access to the 'treasures of world culture' was both an intellectual and an existential act. Averintsev combined the roles of researcher and educator; his studies of culture became 'the unearthing of the forbidden treasure,' i.e. the returning of the Western European heritage to the Russian-speaking intelligentsia.<sup>112</sup> His treatment of almost every research problem circled back to the general understanding of European culture, presented as the synthesis of two elements: Athens and Jerusalem,<sup>113</sup> that is, the idea of a rationally organised space (cosmos) underlying the Greek worldview, and the idea of historical time at the core of the Old Testament worldview.<sup>114</sup> Moreover, since European culture, at least 'at the peak of its development', was a Christian culture, Averintsev used historical and philological commentary on church hymns or theological treatises, if not for direct preaching, then at least for religious enlightenment. Later in this chapter, I will examine how this enlightenment component of his research work developed in the religious sermons, political speeches and moral criticism that Averintsev turned to from the late 1980s.

Thus, Sergei Averintsev's intellectual strategy was both to intentionally ignore official Marxism and to contrast the 'treasures' of European culture with the Soviet symbolic order.

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<sup>112</sup> Averintsev, "Nemnogo lichnogo," 16.

<sup>113</sup> Such way of posing the question goes back, through Losev and Bakhtin, to Viacheslav Ivanov and Lev Shestov. See: Pamela Davidson, "Afiny i Ierusalim: dve veshchi nesovmestnye? (Znachenie idei Viacheslava Ivanova dlia sovremennoi Rossii)," in *Filosofiiia. Literatura. Iskusstvo: Andrei Bely — Viacheslav Ivanov — Alexander Scriabin* (Rossiiskaia politicheskaiia entsiklopediia (ROSSPEN), 2012), 366–374.

<sup>114</sup> Averintsev, *Poetika rannevizantiiskoi literatury*, 92–103.

What made this strategy possible was his understanding of both the written and unwritten rules of the late Soviet academic game, as well as his ability to secure the support of editors and influential patrons. Averintsev expanded the scope of philological research, venturing deep into philosophical territory. Working primarily with classical texts, he analysed the key concepts and symbols that constituted the normative foundations of ‘worldview types.’ Examining their interactions, collisions, or syntheses served him as a gateway to discovering the ‘structure of meaning’ of European culture as a whole. The process of such discovery was framed as an experience that was at once intellectual and existential, one that Averintsev shared with ‘his own’ audience.

## The Intellectual Cult

Averintsev’s intellectual cult took shape in the late 1960s and early 1970s. He gained recognition among the educated public beyond academia through his book on Plutarch and his entries in the *Philosophical Encyclopaedia*, but above all through his public lectures, at which, according to his listeners, people gathered ‘from all across Moscow.’<sup>115</sup> Iurii Popov, in an interview, describes Averintsev’s famous lectures at the Faculty of History of Moscow State University (1969–72):

My wife, Olga Popova, taught the history of medieval art, Western and Byzantine, at Professor Lazarev’s department.<sup>116</sup> She often visited him at home, and during one such visit, she suggested: there is this very interesting person, why not invite him to give a course on the history of ancient or medieval aesthetics as a guest lecturer? And so, at Lazarev’s invitation, Averintsev began giving lectures at the Faculty of History. It was a big event [*sobytie*] — the place was so packed that there weren’t enough seats;

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<sup>115</sup> Sedakova, “S.S. Averintsev. Trudy i dni,” 64.

<sup>116</sup> Viktor Lazarev (1897–1976), historian, the Head of the Department of History of Foreign Art at Moscow State University in 1960–1976.

people sat on the stairs. [...] It all ended in a scandal — the Party authorities intervened and shut down the lectures.

— *Why do you think his lectures were such a huge success?*

It's really interesting because the subject matter is academic — it's cultural history. There were two things. Firstly, the form — he spoke in a very lively and direct way. It was an expressive and unusual way of talking, a vivid flow of thought, rich in imagery. Secondly, the content was not trivial. And I think that during those years of stagnation, the history of world culture was perceived as a kind of breakthrough. It was all so unusual. Averintsev appeared almost as a character from the Silver Age, even just in the way he spoke.<sup>117</sup>

Other informants said similar things about Averintsev's lectures. Olga Sedakova, Nina Braginskaya, and Nikolai Shaburov attended them during their student years and were deeply impressed by both the content and the style. In almost the same words, they told me that 'there was nothing like it at the time.' For many years, Averintsev set the standard of intellectual work for them. They were amazed by his erudition — he mentioned names and events they had never heard of before — but what left the strongest impression was his lecturing style.

Nowadays, we can watch recordings of some of Averintsev's later lectures online but can hardly experience them in the same way as listeners in the late Soviet period. For example, the lecture 'Christianity in the History of European Culture,' which he gave in 1990, is available on YouTube.<sup>118</sup> Averintsev is dressed formally, wearing a slightly baggy grey suit, a light blue shirt, and a dark tie, along with thick-lensed glasses held by a cord. During the lecture, he stands in one place; his body seems tense and stiff: he is slightly hunched, his

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<sup>117</sup> Iurii Popov, philosopher, Averintsev's friend and editor, interview date: 07.12.2024.

<sup>118</sup> Averintsev S.S. *Khristianstvo v istorii evropeiskoi kul'tury*, 45:23, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MDZa8Tb5ICw>. Printed version: Sergei Averintsev, "Khristianstvo v istorii evropeiskoi kul'tury," in *Drugoi Rim: Izbrannye stat'i*, by Sergei Averintsev (Amfora, 2005), 276–314.

head is almost always lowered and even appears to be drawn into his shoulders, and he is nearly motionless, using only his hands to gesture. His speech is unhurried, his voice quiet and monotonous, nasal, and slightly lisping: perhaps not the most appealing style by today's standards.

However, his audience perceived these features quite differently. The historian Nina Braginskaya was emotional when telling me about his style:

These lectures were wonderful, amazing! There was nothing like them at the time.

— *And what exactly was different from what you could hear in other lecture rooms?*

Everything. Starting with the manner, when the person not only does not read anything from a paper but chooses the words as he speaks... I remember he wanted to explain how to understand that 'the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters,' in Genesis: 'You see, He doesn't rush or hover, He *schwebte*...' — sometimes he switched to German — 'The Spirit hangs over this abyss like a hen over her eggs.' He explained the meanings of things that had long become clichés, diving into their depths. His voice was unique — absolutely not an oratorical voice but completely mesmerising. That is, there was no noise or chatting at his lectures whatsoever. His gestures — he would raise his hands... He was so hunched, awkward, and he was thinking right in front of you. Well, maybe he was slightly pretending to be thinking, but it gave the impression that he was talking to each person individually, not like a lecturer telling you what you need to learn.<sup>119</sup>

Thus, what in another intellectual context might have been perceived as a flaw here became a sign of uniqueness. Averintsev gave his lectures differently from other Soviet academics: he did not read from a prepared text, giving the listener the impression of a spontaneous unfolding of thought (although, apparently, he did not improvise but prepared his lectures

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<sup>119</sup> Nina Braginskaia, historian and philologist, Averintsev's colleague, interview date: 28.12.2024.

carefully<sup>120</sup>). While his lectures were inherently monologic, rhetorically he constructed them dialogically: he addressed the listener, as if thinking together with them and sharing doubts, digressing from the topic or unexpectedly linking different subjects,<sup>121</sup> introducing new names and theological texts perceived as ‘forbidden,’<sup>122</sup> or hinting at meanings significant to the educated public.<sup>123</sup> He did not miss an opportunity to demonstrate his erudition and would tease the audience — for example, by switching to German or reciting ancient Greek texts from memory,<sup>124</sup> as if expecting the listeners to understand him (only a handful among them were probably able to make sense of these quotations without translation or to recognise his allusions).

Nikolai Shaburov, who claimed that in the early 1970s he was ‘a fan who never missed a single lecture,’ claims that Averintsev overestimated the intellectual level of his audience:

He allowed himself to say (I used to argue with some of my sarcastic friends who claimed he did it on purpose, while I was sure he didn’t): ‘Well, you remember, of

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<sup>120</sup> As Alexander Dobrokhotoev told me in an interview ‘his oral presentation was structured as a written, good literary text’. This is evident, in particular, by the fact that his lectures became the base for his articles and books.

<sup>121</sup> ‘He was focused on holding together different lines of thought. Like a juggler whose balls don’t drop. He makes a digression, then comes back to the topic. To follow his train of thought was always a colossal pleasure.’ Gasan Gusejnov, philologist, Losev’s secretary and Averintsev’s colleague; interview dates: 25 and 27.10.2024.

<sup>122</sup> ‘A large university auditorium could not accommodate even a third of the people who gathered ‘for Averintsev’ to hear for the first time — in his translations and with his commentaries — the dizzying passages from the treatises of Areopagitus, the hymns of Damascene and other great Byzantine theologians and mystics (often in comparison with Latin patristic thought), to see the manifold implication of general theological positions in architecture, temple art, and liturgical poetry.’ Sedakova, “S.S. Averintsev. Trudy i dni,” 71.

<sup>123</sup> ‘When he talks about epigrams in an article on rhetoric, it is clear that he is referring to contemporary popular joke [*anekdot*], a genre that could not be spoken of.’ Gasan Gusejnov, philologist, Losev’s secretary and Averintsev’s colleague; interview dates: 25 and 27.10.2024. See: Sergei Averintsev, “Ritorika kak podkhod k obobshcheniiu deistvitel’nosti,” in *Ritorika i istoki evropeiskoi literaturnoi traditsii* (Shkola “Iazyki russkoi kul’tury,” 1996), 171–182.

<sup>124</sup> ‘He took pride in his education. Suddenly, out of the blue, he would start reciting Greek passages that he had memorised. And I was also a classical student. I thought it was pretentious and not always appropriate.’ Vera Tolz, historian, Dmitrii Likhachev’s granddaughter, interview date: 05.11.2024.

course, how the third treatise of Plotinus's fourth Ennead begins...' The audience swooned, of course.<sup>125</sup>

I suspect those 'sarcastic friends' were right, but it is clear that Averintsev's distinctive lecturing style was consciously cultivated.<sup>126</sup>

Averintsev's style was perceived by his admirers as a form of complete otherness ('there was nothing like his lectures'), as belonging to a different, non-Soviet culture. Firstly, like many other late Soviet cult figures, he was associated with the Silver Age. This may seem strange for someone born in 1937; however, both Averintsev himself and, subsequently, his friends and admirers established this link with the prestigious pre-revolutionary culture through his father.<sup>127</sup> Averintsev senior was 62 years old when his son was born, so Averintsev junior could hypothetically have been born at the turn of the century and belonged to another era — and this possibility, in a sense, materialised in his cult image. The link to the Silver Age became an important element of his intellectual cult: it is frequently discussed in biographical texts, and it was also mentioned by four of my informants.<sup>128</sup> In general, their argument runs as follows: inheriting from his father the Russian culture of the nineteenth century and the 'traditions of the old professorship,'<sup>129</sup> Averintsev preserved and developed them within the hostile Soviet environment.

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<sup>125</sup> Nikolai Shaburov, historian, Losev's secretary and listener of Averintsev's lectures; interview date: 17.11.2024.

<sup>126</sup> See on labour as the foundation of the 'Averintsev phenomenon': Sedakova, "S.S. Averintsev. Trudy i dni," 64.

<sup>127</sup> Averintsev, *Popytki ob"iasnit'sia. Besedy o kul'ture*, 9; Sedakova, "S.S. Averintsev. Trudy i dni," 60–62; "[Interview with] Natalia Petrovna Averintseva," *Radio "Grad Petrov,"* n.d., accessed December 5, 2025, <https://www.grad-petrov.ru/broadcast/natalya-petrovna-averintseva/>.

<sup>128</sup> Gasan Gusejnov, philologist, Losev's secretary and Averintsev's colleague; interview dates: 25 and 27.10.2024; Olga Sedakova, poet and scholar, Averintsev's friend and colleague, interview date: 09.11.2024; Aleksandr Dobrokhoto, philosopher close to Losev's *kruzhok* and Averintsev's colleague at MSU; interview date: 17.11.2024; Iurii Popov, philosopher, Averintsev's friend and editor, interview date: 07.12.2024.

<sup>129</sup> Aleksandr Dobrokhoto, philosopher close to Losev's *kruzhok* and Averintsev's colleague at MSU; interview date: 17.11.2024.

Secondly, Averintsev was connected with European (or even ‘world’) culture. Again, following him, friends and admirers called Averintsev a ‘Mediterranean *pochvennik*.’<sup>130</sup> This characterisation implies an unconditional recognition of the value of the European cultural tradition, but also conservative religious and political beliefs. A certain paradox arises from the combination of ‘Westernizer’ and ‘*Pochvennichestvo*’ orientations, which are usually clearly distinguished in the Russian context. In Averintsev’s case, however, the ‘Westernizer’ component was devoid of progressivism and secularism, while the ‘*Pochvennichestvo*’ component did not connote nationalism or isolationism. He affirmed the significance of the Western cultural canon and hierarchies, humanistic ideals, and Christian morality, while opposing the frivolity of mass culture, the ‘sexual revolution,’ and feminism. Just as his research approach focused on cultural intersections and syntheses (Athens and Jerusalem), his cultural critique represented a synthesis of two opposing currents of Russian political thought. However, it was not until Perestroika that Averintsev had the opportunity to articulate his understanding of culture in explicitly political terms.<sup>131</sup>

Averintsev was seen by his admirers as a guide to another cultural world, and, in the late 1980s, this guidance was increasingly perceived as political. A particularly telling example of this perception is a story told by one of the characters in Svetlana Alexievich’s *Secondhand Time*, about the Perestroika years:

Those were wonderful, naïve years ... We had faith in Gorbachev like we’ll never have faith in anyone ever again. Many Russians were returning from emigration, coming back to their Motherland. There was so much joy in the air! We thought that we’d tear down these barracks and build something new in their place. I got my degree from the Philology Faculty of Moscow State University and started graduate school. I dreamed of working in academia. In those years, I idolized Averintsev; all of enlightened

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<sup>130</sup> Sedakova, “S.S. Averintsev. Trudy i dni,” 104; Lev Anninskii, “Sredizemnomorskii pochvennik. Pamiati Sergeia Averintseva,” in *In memoriam: Sergei Averintsev*, ed. Renata Galtseva (INION RAN, 2004), 129–133; Vladimir Bondarenko, “Sredizemnomorskii pochvennik Averintsev,” *Den’ literatury*, no 9, September 1999.

<sup>131</sup> For more detail, see the next section.

Moscow sat in on his lectures. We would meet and reinforce one another's delusions that soon, we would find ourselves in a completely different country, and that this was what we were fighting for. I was very surprised when I learned that one of my classmates was moving to Israel. 'Aren't you sorry to leave at a time like this? Things are just starting to get good.'<sup>132</sup>

The juxtaposition of Averintsev's lectures with the dream of the beautiful Russia of the future is by no means accidental. In the eyes of the young graduate student, Averintsev's lectures offered a glimpse into that new world, into the space of intellectual freedom that would come after the fall of communism. It is very characteristic that the actual content of Averintsev's lectures is of no particular importance for her; what matters is his status as a cult figure ('idol') and his audience — 'all of enlightened [i.e. educated, cultural] Moscow,' to which she longed to belong. Attending his lectures, therefore, becomes an act of social identification, an affirmation of one's belonging to the intelligentsia (in this case, presumably its liberal part) and of sharing its norms and values.

Thus, Averintsev was perceived by his late Soviet audience as a guide to the 'treasures of European culture' and a connection to the space of 'universally significant' meanings. As Olga Sedakova writes, although he knew European 'soil' only through books, he resembled 'an old-fashioned local historian, a resident of a small town who needs to know everything about every little detail of the places dear to him.'<sup>133</sup> Here, 'Mediterranean *Pochvennichestvo*' is interpreted in a non-political sense, as an exceptional and detailed knowledge of European culture. This reputation — a scholar who knew Europe better than the Europeans themselves — is affirmed by an anecdote told at one of Averintsev's memorial gatherings by the French slavist Georges Nivat. Once, when Averintsev was visiting him in a French village,

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<sup>132</sup> Svetlana Aleksievich, *Secondhand Time: The Last of the Soviets* (New York: Random House, 2016), 21.

<sup>133</sup> Sedakova, "S.S. Averintsev. Trudy i dni," 104. This is an important trope — she repeated almost the same thing to me in an interview: 'When we happened to be in Paris together, for example, he astonished the locals by being able to tell them something about every house on the central streets [...] He knew Europe as if it were some small provincial town.' Olga Sedakova, poet and scholar, Averintsev's friend and colleague, interview date: 09.11.2024.

Nivat took him to the local church, where Averintsev immediately recognised an image of Saint Francis de Sales and began reciting his texts from memory, first in French and then in Latin. The astonished priest later asked Nivat, ‘Tell me, are all Soviet biblical scholars like this?’<sup>134</sup>

Averintsev’s erudition, ‘incomparable’ or ‘dizzying,’ apparently approaching omniscience, was another important element of his intellectual cult. Vera Tolz shared with me, in an interview, a story that complements Nivat’s anecdote:

Averintsev absolutely could not admit that he did not know something. [...] My aunt<sup>135</sup> was friends with him, and she told me that they were once at a Byzantinist congress together, I think in Greece. [...] They were in an Orthodox church where a very unusual ritual took place during the service. Since Averintsev was known as someone who knew everything, people turned to him for an explanation. He started explaining — making things up, offering some kind of interpretation — and then it turned out that it was just a very local ritual, which, of course, he could not have known about. [...] And this story matches my own impressions, because his identity was not just that of an interesting thinker, but of someone who always knew absolutely everything.<sup>136</sup>

Averintsev, therefore, actively participated in the creation of his own cult image: his lecturing style, his self-presentation, and his cultivated intellectualism became the foundation for admiring portrayals by friends and followers. The key features of this image were, in addition to his sense of otherness and omniscience, in the first place, his philosophical ‘breadth,’ that is, his tendency to transcend disciplinary boundaries and to work with broad concepts, which was perceived as a unique ability to establish a ‘connection of everything with everything’ or to ‘grasp the entire two-thousand-year-old culture of antiquity and Christianity

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<sup>134</sup> “Sovetskii bibleist, znaiushchii Frantsiska Sal'skogo,” *Preobrazhenskoe bratstvo*, 2004, <https://psmb.ru/a/sovetskiy-bibleist-znayushchiy-franciska-salskogo.html>.

<sup>135</sup> Vera Likhacheva (1937–1981), a historian and specialist in Byzantine art.

<sup>136</sup> Vera Tolz, historian, Dmitrii Likhachev’s granddaughter, interview date: 05.11.2024.

as a whole.’<sup>137</sup> This ability allowed Averintsev to meet the growing demand for a conceptual alternative to the explanatory models established in official Soviet historiography.<sup>138</sup>

Also important was his religious preaching, or rather, his aspiration to instil Christian values in a wide audience using academic discourse. He became — in Averintsev’s own words on Alexander Men (1935–1990), a priest who played a crucial role in bringing the intelligentsia to Orthodoxy in the late Soviet period — a ‘missionary for the intelligentsia tribe.’<sup>139</sup> Men was an original theologian who sought to find ‘unity in diversity’ by engaging not only with various Christian traditions but also with other religions (especially Judaism), synthesising the philosophies of Vladimir Solov’ev and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, and using the language of secular knowledge in his preaching.<sup>140</sup> Having gained wide recognition in the late 1980s, he was widely considered a representative of a new Orthodoxy open to change, rational thinking, and ecumenical dialogue with Western Churches, and, in this regard, was similar to Sergei Averintsev.

And finally, there was his charisma, that is his suggestive power, his ability to influence his listeners and readers, to make a great impression or even to ‘mesmerise’ them. For example, Vladimir Bibikhin opens his notes on Averintsev as follows:

Wherever Averintsev appeared, it became a celebration or an event. So, to talk about his merits is one thing — and for that one should read his books, a task for the future.

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<sup>137</sup> See, for example, the remarks by Olga Sedakova and Nina Braginskaia at the presentation of the first volume of Averintsev’s Collected Works at Saint Tikhon’s Orthodox University: “Sergei Averintsev: «Vremeni nuzhny ne te, kto emu poddakivaet...»,” *Pravoslavnyi Sviato-Tikhonovskii gumanitarnyi universitet*, December 22, 2024, [https://pstgu.ru/news/main/sergey\\_averintsev\\_vremeni\\_nuzhny\\_ne\\_te\\_kto\\_emu\\_poddakivaet/](https://pstgu.ru/news/main/sergey_averintsev_vremeni_nuzhny_ne_te_kto_emu_poddakivaet/). Their words fully correspond to what they tell me in interviews.

<sup>138</sup> Denis Kozlov, “The Historical Turn in Late Soviet Culture: Retrospectivism, Factography, Doubt, 1953–91,” *Kritika (Bloomington, Ind.)* 2, no. 3 (2001): 580–581.

<sup>139</sup> Sergei Averintsev, “Missioner dlia plemeni intelligentov,” *Literaturnaia gazeta*, September 4, 1991.

<sup>140</sup> Kateřina Kočandrlé Bauer and Tim Noble, “Alexander Men and Russian Religious Thought in the Post-Soviet Situation,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Russian Religious Thought*, with George Pattison et al. (Oxford University Press, 2020), 635–638; Barbara Martin, “Protoierei Aleksandr Men - 'missioner dlia plemeni intelligentov'. Problemy pastyrskoi praktiki v SSSR v period religioznogo vozrozhdeniia (1970–1980 gg.),” in *Otkrytyi dostup: al'manakh*, ed. Pavel Kuzmin (Biblioteka inostrannoi literatury, 2022), 38–41.

But to understand who he was is another matter — a matter of faith. Everyone felt that it would not be right to meet Averintsev and not think about him afterward, at the very least to write something down. Who has not done so?<sup>141</sup>

This is a very telling (if not self-revealing) distinction: to assess the merits of an intellectual work, one must read books, but to appreciate a cult figure, one must ‘believe’ and ‘feel.’ Just as Christine Evans shows, in the 1960s and 1970s, ‘the “socialist way of life” in the Soviet Union came to be defined primarily in terms of emotion,’<sup>142</sup> and its highbrow alternative likewise functioned as a ‘way of feeling.’ Averintsev offered his audience sophisticated intellectual work, but both the ‘structures of meaning’ he discovered in classical texts and his own figure, which carefully guided the reader or listener towards those structures, required a specific emotional disposition — intense feelings of admiration, reverence and awe that would make them ‘think about him afterwards.’ Of course, not all of his listeners experienced his lectures this way (he was, after all, addressing well-educated people), yet his enormous popularity suggests the prevalence and cultural significance of this emotional disposition.

### **The *Pridykhanie* Intonation**

Just as performance was paramount in Averintsev’s lectures, intonation plays a major role in the stories told about him. In late Soviet culture, a particular manner of speaking about cult figures developed — a specific intonation considered appropriate when speaking of ‘great’ people. Followers and admirers spoke about them *s pridykhaniem* [with aspiration]. Literally, *pridykhanie* or aspiration refers to the acoustic effect that occurs when air is exhaled during the pronunciation of sounds. Thus, to speak *s pridykhaniem* means to pronounce words in such a way that a faint exhalation is audible (resembling the English [h]), with a quieter, lower, and softer voice. One can speak *s pridykhaniem* quietly and carefully, as if afraid to disturb

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<sup>141</sup> Bibikhin, *Aleksei Fedorovich Losev. Sergei Sergeevich Averintsev*, 305.

<sup>142</sup> Christine Evans, “The ‘Soviet Way of Life’ as a Way of Feeling: Emotion and Influence on Soviet Central Television in the Brezhnev Era,” *Cahiers Du Monde Russe* (Paris) 56, no. 2/3 (2015): 544.

the silence of a sacred place, or, conversely, with enthusiasm and even exaltation. But in both cases, it means speaking with emotion, as if out of breath, unable to fully express in words reverence for something lofty or sacred.

*Pridykhanie* serves as a means of influencing the listener, convincing them of the uniqueness of the cult figure through emotional suggestion (it is worth mentioning that the expression ‘*s pridykhaniem*’ is slightly ironic and therefore is never used in the first person: ‘I speak *s pridykhaniem*’). In this sense, we can speak of the *pridykhanie* intonation not only in spoken language but also in written texts. In writing, *pridykhanie* is conveyed through the excessive use of positive epithets, solemn or archaic vocabulary, and capitalisation; short nominal sentences, exclamation marks and/or ellipses also convey this intonation, serving as a syntactic equivalent of breathlessness caused by excitement and awe. These features are abundant in memoirs and commemorative writings whose authors passionately recount interactions with a ‘great’ person as in these examples.

1) From Renata Galtseva memoirs: ‘Genius Averintsev (next to whom everything seems clumsy)’ or ‘The invaluable traditions of Sergei Averintsev are not continued in academic forms. The pursuit [*vzyskanie*, an obsolete and solemn word] of meaning has been excluded from research,’ or simply ‘New Descartes.’<sup>143</sup>

2) From Olga Sedakova’s essays: ‘To experience the mind differently, in a light forgotten by later history, one must, it seems, first be naturally endowed with such a different mind: broad, bright, flexible, lively, inspired. [...] Pushkin and Averintsev were endowed with such a cheerful mind — each in his own way.’<sup>144</sup> Or: ‘We, as Averintsev said, felt ourselves in a secret and passionate conspiracy with people of all languages and epochs who had something to say. And, undoubtedly, the head of this ‘secret alliance,’ this worldwide conspiracy, in those years was none other than Sergei

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<sup>143</sup> Galtseva, *Pamiatnoe*.

<sup>144</sup> Sedakova, “Apologija ratsional'nogo,” 189–190.

Sergeevich Averintsev. The Grand Master of the Game of free and high human spirit.<sup>145</sup>

3) From an article by journalist and literary critic Vladimir Bondarenko: ‘Later I read Andrei Bitov’s similar assessment of Averintsev’s early legendary status: “Averintsev was extremely famous — thanks to his detachment, his erudition, and his quiet voice. This fame astonished me. It wasn’t supported by the environment. No rockets, no ideology. And yet it was there. Out of nowhere. Effortlessly. Classicist. People said he would whisper things no one could understand, and yet he gathered audiences that poets could only dream of. I was completely stunned when I learned he was born the same year as me. I knew the darkness of my generation — it was justified by my own. I could imagine my great-grandfather as a classicist — but he was born in Pushkin’s time. I had heard of Losev, someone who managed to survive despite all... But that someone like me... no way!”’<sup>146</sup>

*Pridykhaniye* fulfils important functions in the creation and maintenance of an intellectual cult. Firstly, it establishes a distance between a worshipper and a cult figure, elevating the latter above ordinary people. For example, in Bitov’s words quoted by Bondarenko,<sup>147</sup> Averintsev is contrasted with the ‘dark’ generation to which they belonged by age (both were born in 1937), as someone who possesses high pre-revolutionary culture. Thus, Averintsev is set apart from the Soviet environment and placed among the ‘greats’: either through direct comparisons with geniuses of the past (Descartes, Pushkin<sup>148</sup>) or through recognition by

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<sup>145</sup> Olga Sedakova, “Moia vtoraiia vstrecha s Averintsevym,” Olga Sedakova, <http://www.olgasedakova.com/Moralia/2057>.

<sup>146</sup> Bondarenko, “Sredizemnomorskii pochvennik Averintsev.”

<sup>147</sup> If Bondarenko’s quotation is verbatim, I was unable to find the original source. However, it may be a paraphrase; see the similar passage in Andrei Bitov’s interview with the Ukrainian writer Sergei Solov’ev: Andrei Bitov and Sergei Solov’ev, “«Tupik — eto ochen’ interesnaia veshch’». Andrei Bitov o russkom iazyke, postimperii i astrologii russkoi literatury,” *Kriticheskaiia Massa*, no. 4 (2006).

<sup>148</sup> This comparison is particularly important, as Pushkin is the principal figure in the Russian cultural canon, and the construction of the Pushkin myth has an archetypal significance. See: Paul Debreczeny, “Zhitie Aleksandra Boldinskogo’: Pushkin’s Elevation to Sainthood in Soviet Culture,” in *Late Soviet Culture: From Perestroika to Novostroika*, ed. Thomas Lahusen and Gene Kuperman (Duke University Press, 1993), 47-65; Abram Reitblat, *Kak Pushkin vyshel v genii: Istoriko-sotsiologicheskie ocherki o knizhnoi kul'ture Pushkinskoi*

prominent contemporaries (Bondarenko quotes Andrei Bitov, and Sedakova quotes Venedikt Erofeev). *Pridykhanie*, consequently, serves to reinforce symbolic hierarchies emotionally.

Secondly, it distinguishes worshippers themselves and those who share their reverence for a cult figure from uninitiated, ignorant or cynical people.<sup>149</sup> In this respect, *pridykhanie* helps to create around a cult figure a kind of emotional, or even spiritual, community, that is, an association of followers and admirers for whom contact with this figure was a transformative experience and a means of entering the space of cultural values ('world culture', the Christian tradition, the Silver Age, etc.). In *pridykhanie*, there remains an echo of an emotionally charged relationship with a cult figure and a sense of particular importance of personal contact, the teacher-to-disciple transmission of knowledge and moral principles.

Thirdly, *pridykhanie* serves as a means of ascribing meaning, as it implies the presence of deep wisdom even in the incomprehensible or seemingly insignificant words of a cult figure. Personal contact, ranging from close friendship to attending a public lecture, allows one not only to feel the scale of a cult figure's personality but also to discover deep meaning in their most ordinary words and actions. For instance, it was precisely Averintsev's ability to 'whisper things no one could understand' before a huge audience that sparked Bitov's admiration. Even his posture and gestures were perceived by admirers as full of meaning and a special kind of freedom.<sup>150</sup> Thus, the *pridykhanie* intonation is an essential part of the canonisation process, combining the affirmation of greatness, a personal connection and a sense of meaning. *Pridykhanie* complements and emotionally charges other, more rational, forms of cult-building, such as publishing, studying or commenting on a cult figure's works. By presenting the cult figure as a Teacher or an intellectual star, this manner of speaking or

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*epokhi* (Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie, 2001), 51–69; Joan Brooks, *Greetings, Puskin!: Stalinist Cultural Politics and the Russian National Bard* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2016).

<sup>149</sup> For example: Sedakova, "S.S. Averintsev. Trudy i dni," 92–94.

<sup>150</sup> Alexis Berelowitch was one of the first who draw attention to this key feature of late Soviet intellectual cults. Berelowitch, "O kul'te lichnosti i ego posledstviakh." I also analyse it in my forthcoming article on the philosopher Merab Mamardashvili: Egor Sokolov, 'A Special Extraterritoriality of His Position': Merab Mamardashvili's Self-Presentation Strategy and Creation of His Intellectual Cult (accepted for publication in *The Russian Review*).

writing contributes to the concentration of symbolic capital and the reproduction of the system of intellectual reputations.

### **Lecture as an Event**

Averintsev's lectures made him a star — not merely a scholar but an intellectual and moral authority, possessing a distinctive style and capable of influencing and inspiring his audience by giving it access to 'true' (Christian, Western, pre-revolutionary Russian) culture. After the course on the history of Byzantine aesthetics at the Faculty of History at Moscow State University (1971–72), Averintsev was not allowed to teach regularly until the very end of the 1980s. From time to time, he gave public lectures at cultural institutions such as the State Institute of Performing Arts, the Polytechnic Museum or the Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts.<sup>151</sup> And although these lectures were successful and continued to attract large audiences, it is the courses at MSU that remained the symbolic event, one of the most important in Averintsev's biography as a cult figure, and invariably mentioned in memoirs and interviews. This is how my informants recall the audience of these lectures:

There were all kinds of people, this intellectual audience, from different places, of different ages. [...] It became a niche [where it was possible to satisfy] what was later called 'nostalgia for the world culture.'<sup>152</sup>

The audience consisted mostly of students, but postgraduates and teachers also came, of course, and people came from all over Moscow. [...] There was an audience that you could recognise by their faces. The popularity was incredible. I don't even know who to compare it to, except for Vysotskii maybe; it was equally full of people,

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<sup>151</sup> Gasan Gusejnov, philologist, Losev's secretary and Averintsev's colleague; interview dates: 25 and 27.10.2024; Bibikhin, *Aleksei Fedorovich Losev. Sergei Sergeevich Averintsev*, 333–336, 343, 352.

<sup>152</sup> Iurii Popov, philosopher, Averintsev's friend and editor, interview date: 07.12.2024.

so it was impossible to get in. But the crowd was slightly different, i.e. mostly people with higher education or who were getting one.<sup>153</sup>

A very broad audience, and diverse. [...] There were adults, whoever you want, mathematicians, chemists. But, of course, there were few people with no education at all.<sup>154</sup>

According to their accounts, Averintsev's lectures attracted 'all of enlightened Moscow' — a very large and diverse audience (although it is hard to tell now whether this diversity is retrospectively overstated), but one that was almost exclusively educated. In fact, as many people as this narrative implies could not have attended — the lecture hall in the First Humanities Building at Moscow State University, where these lectures were held, even when it was 'so full that the apple had nowhere to fall,'<sup>155</sup> could probably accommodate only about two to three hundred people. However, although Averintsev's lectures could not attract audience as large as that of Vysotskii's concerts, the comparison with the famous artist<sup>156</sup> is justified: both managed to create an aura of intimate conversation and trust, as if within a small circle of friends, for a crowd of a few hundred (in Vysotskii's case, sometimes a few thousand) people.<sup>157</sup>

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<sup>153</sup> Tatiana Borodai, philosopher, Averintsev's colleague at MSU, interview date: 10.12.2024.

<sup>154</sup> Nina Braginskaia, historian and philologist, Averintsev's colleague, interview date: 28.12.2024.

<sup>155</sup> Nikolai Shaburov, historian, Losev's secretary and listener of Averintsev's lectures; interview date: 17.11.2024.

<sup>156</sup> See also: 'The early 1970s: an Averintsev's lecture in the Great Hall of the Polytechnic Museum, where, in those same years, Andrei Voznesenskii, Evgenii Evtushenko and Bulat Okudzhava also drew audiences numbering in the hundreds. The hall was no less crowded.' Aleksandr Kopirovskii, "Tsarstvennoe slovo," *Literaturnaia gazeta*, January 1, 2007, <https://lgz.ru/article/tsarstvennoe-slovo>.

<sup>157</sup> Christopher Lazarski, "Vladimir Vysotsky and His Cult," *The Russian Review* 51, no. 1 (1992): 63; Rachel Platonov, *Singing the Self: Guitar Poetry, Community, and Identity in the Post-Stalin Period* (Northwestern University Press, 2012), 71.

Averintsev's lectures were akin to other cultural phenomena, such as the publication of and discussion about *Not by Bread Alone* by Vladimir Dudintsev,<sup>158</sup> the songs of Bulat Okudzhava<sup>159</sup> and Vladimir Vysotskii<sup>160</sup>; the poetry of Evgenii Evtushenko and Andrei Voznesenskii<sup>161</sup>; and plays directed by Iurii Liubimov at the Taganka Theatre,<sup>162</sup> all of which were popular with different, albeit partially overlapping, audiences. On the one hand, they existed 'in between' late Soviet official and unofficial cultures,<sup>163</sup> providing an opportunity for the expression of permitted dissent, always at the edge of what was possible — as such publications, concerts, performances or lectures were not banned, but nor did they take place routinely, each time requiring efforts to push them through [*probivaniie*], turning them into 'yet another exception to the rule.'<sup>164</sup> On the other hand, these phenomena were often perceived as something extraordinary, intense and sincere — as something completely other, not anti- but un-Soviet. As such, they may be understood as an 'event,' that is, a phenomenon that breaks with the existing symbolic order and reconfigures the subjectivity of the participants.<sup>165</sup>

In her study of Soviet bards, Rachel Platonov argues that guitar poetry became so popular not only because people genuinely wanted to listen to it, but also because, inspired by the bard's exceptional personality, they themselves picked up guitars and began to play,

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<sup>158</sup> Denis Kozlov, "Naming the Social Evil: The Readers of Novyi Mir and Vladimir Dudintsev's *Not by Bread Alone*, 1956-59 and Beyond," in *The Dilemmas of De-Stalinization: Negotiating Cultural and Social Change in the Khrushchev Era*, ed. Polly Jones (Routledge, 2006), 80–85.

<sup>159</sup> Kozlov, "The Historical Turn in Late Soviet Culture": 587–588; See also the analysis of Bulat Okudzhava's novel *Poor Avrosimov* in: Khazanov, *The Russia That We Have Lost*, 62–68.

<sup>160</sup> Platonov, *Singing the Self*, 66–68.

<sup>161</sup> Benjamin Musachio, "Through the Looking-Glass: The Popularization of Soviet Poets in 1960s America" (PhD in Slavic Languages and Literatures, Princeton University, 2025), 29–108.

<sup>162</sup> Birgit Beumers, *Yuri Lyubimov: Thirty Years at the Taganka Theatre* (Taylor & Francis Group, 1997), 10–34.

<sup>163</sup> Ainsley Morse, "In-Betweeners: Navigating Between Official and Nonofficial Cultures," in *The Oxford Handbook of Soviet Underground Culture*, ed. Mark Lipovetsky et al. (Oxford University Press, 2024), 227–234.

<sup>164</sup> Andrei Zorin, "Mezhdu dvumia vecherami," in *Gde sidit fazan... Ocherki poslednikh let* (Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie, 2003), 39.

<sup>165</sup> This understanding of an 'event' largely follows Alain Badiou's thought. See, for example: Peter Hallward, *Badiou: A Subject to Truth* (University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 107–112.

exploring their own identities.<sup>166</sup> Similarly, for some attendees, Averintsev's lectures were a transformative experience that affected the direction and style of their thinking. Almost all of my informants mentioned the intellectual influence that Averintsev had on them. His lectures could, for example, inspire young students to change their specialisation: Nikolai Shaburov told me in an interview that they prompted him to begin studying ancient history.<sup>167</sup> In other cases, they could, to some extent, shape listeners' intellectual style: Nina Braginskaia said that she wrote her academic papers thinking about how Averintsev would react if he read them.<sup>168</sup> Finally, for Olga Sedakova, Averintsev's influence was even more significant — she told me that his lectures and texts 'fostered a different kind of cultural person, which simply did not exist in Soviet times.'<sup>169</sup>

For other attendees, the transformative experience was linked to the religious themes that Averintsev discussed in detail. For them, it was not so much his intellectual sophistication or broad erudition that mattered, but rather the fact that he spoke of Byzantine culture as Christian. This approach was particularly eloquently expressed by Orthodox priests with a humanitarian background, such as Georgii Chistiakov and Valentin Asmus. In their descriptions, Averintsev's lectures, while remaining a model of professional academic work, were at the same time — and above all — a preaching of Christian faith. Chistiakov, for example, states that 'to every listener, it immediately became clear from these lectures that the lecturer not only knew the Gospel and the patristic tradition, but truly believed in God

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<sup>166</sup> Platonov, *Singing the Self*, 84.

<sup>167</sup> Nikolai Shaburov, historian, Losev's secretary and listener of Averintsev's lectures; interview date: 17.11.2024.

<sup>168</sup> Nina Braginskaia, historian and philologist, Averintsev's colleague, interview date: 28.12.2024.

<sup>169</sup> Olga Sedakova, poet and scholar, Averintsev's friend and colleague, interview date: 09.11.2024.

himself,<sup>170</sup> and Asmus insists that during these lectures ‘conversions to the Christian faith took place.’<sup>171</sup> In my interviews, Aleksandr Dobrokhotoev touched upon this subject:

Of course, he did not lecture about Christianity, but in one way or another, the Christian theme was always present. In general, everyone knew he was a believer, and people could ask him about it in the corridor. And Averintsev talked, willingly, about his path to the Church.

— *Right there, in the lecture room?*

No, no — in the corridor. Students would, of course, run up to him, grab his sleeve, and ask questions. In the lecture room — no. Not only would he probably not answer, but it would be tactless to ask. Everyone knew what times were like. But in a private conversation, he would speak. [...]

— *But these conversations weren't with close acquaintances, just with students he didn't really know?*

Yes. I wasn't part of his close circle. Even when I was, so to speak, his superior at the Department,<sup>172</sup> we still mostly spoke in corridors, on the way to the metro, or during conference breaks. [...]

— *I mean, it's a very frank conversation: in the 1970s, he starts telling strangers about his path to the Church.*

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<sup>170</sup> Georgii Chistiakov, “Ob S.S. Averintseve,” *Vestnik Evropy*, no. 11 (2004), <https://magazines.gorky.media/vestnik/2004/11/ob-s-s-averinczeve.html>.

<sup>171</sup> Valentin Asmus, “Sergei Sergeevich Averintsev: filolog, filosof, bogoslov,” *Zhurnal Moskovskoi Patriarkhii*, no. 8 (2024), 73.

<sup>172</sup> The Department of the History and Theory of World Culture at the Faculty of Philosophy at Moscow State University, established in 1990.

Yes. But that was characteristic [of him]. If a question seemed important to him, he could avoid answering, but if he answered, he did not dissemble.<sup>173</sup>

Here, Dobrokhotov partly confirms that Averintsev's combined academic and missionary work, but with an important caveat, as he stresses that conversations about religious experience took place *outside* academic halls. However, some of Averintsev's listeners did not constrain themselves with academic etiquette (or simply were unaware of it), straightforwardly regarding scholarly discourse on religion as a religious event. Sedakova, for example, writes that after Averintsev's lectures, people would bring children to be blessed by him, as if by a priest.<sup>174</sup> When I asked her about this in an interview, she clarified that although, after a lecture, crowds of admirers rushed toward 'just to touch him,' Averintsev distanced himself from the role of a spiritual leader:

He was very strict in this regard, constantly saying: 'That is not my role — you are confusing things.' He was too intelligent to indulge his ego like that. And he warned everyone against the desire to make him a spiritual leader.<sup>175</sup>

It seems that Averintsev did indeed reject spiritual leadership; yet, as we have already seen, he deliberately blurred the boundary between the historical study of religious texts and theology. It was this unusual and risky strategy that defined his writings, even his encyclopaedia entries; it attracted readers' interest, enraged specialists in scientific atheism, and contributed greatly to his cult status. Apparently, for some of Averintsev's admirers, this blurring of lines between the study and profession of religion led to a further blurring between the roles of scholar and priest in his public image. As in the case of Alexei Losev, which I discussed in the previous chapter, Averintsev's role as a guide to the realm of the sacred began to be perceived as a sign of his own holiness. The difference, however, is

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<sup>173</sup> Aleksandr Dobrokhotov, philosopher close to Losev's *kruzhok* and Averintsev's colleague at MSU; interview date: 17.11.2024.

<sup>174</sup> Olga Sedakova, "Vstuplenie," in *Sergei Sergeevich Averintsev: Vospominaniia. Razmyshleniia. Posviashcheniia* (Sviato-Filaretovskii pravoslavno-khristianskii institut, 2020), 7–8.

<sup>175</sup> Olga Sedakova, poet and scholar, Averintsev's friend and colleague, interview date: 09.11.2024.

that here in Averintsev's case, this idea of holiness remained marginal and was not integrated into his cult. While Aza Takho-Godi created a hagiographical narrative of Losev as a 'scholar-monk in the world,'<sup>176</sup> Olga Sedakova regards the requests to bless children that Averintsev received as a curious misunderstanding, even if it emphasised his cultural significance.

Finally, there was yet another group of listeners (perhaps the most numerous) who perceived them as a cultural occasion, akin to a concert or a social gathering — a place for meeting, socialising and mutual recognition, where attendance itself served as confirmation of one's belonging to the circle of educated and cultured people. From the perspective of his devoted friends and admirers, such an audience was not prepared to appreciate the content of his lectures, but was still deeply impressed by their form:

Averintsev speaks, let's say, at the Agricultural Academy and talks about King Oedipus. But those who came to listen weren't his students; they weren't taking an exam with him. There was no feedback from such an audience. Of course, at times it resembled a concert by a famous tenor. People simply came to listen — knowing nothing at all about the material he would be discussing. But the depth and brilliance of his presentation gave immense pleasure, even if people were hearing those names for the first time.<sup>177</sup>

As in the case of pre-revolutionary opera singers, such as Feodor Chaliapin, it was also often the performer's personality rather than talent that became the object of fixation. Anna Fishzon, for example, observes that at the beginning of the twentieth century, opera fans saw their idols as unique personalities and the very embodiment of authenticity.<sup>178</sup> Even the

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<sup>176</sup> For example, she wrote that, a few days after Losev's death 'some hieromonk approaches [me], blessing, and says with conviction: "His holiness is being witnessed." Who is this man? And why holiness? I don't know yet that the Losevs took their monastic vows, and I am yet to experience that.' Takho-Godi, Losev, 443.

<sup>177</sup> Olga Sedakova, poet and scholar, Averintsev's friend and colleague, interview date: 09.11.2024.

<sup>178</sup> Anna Fishzon, "Confessions of a *Psikhopatka*: Opera Fandom and the Melodramatic Sensibility in Fin-de-Siècle Russia," *The Russian Review* 71, no. 1 (2012): 119–120.

erotic component, so characteristic of a female opera fan [*poklonnitsa*],<sup>179</sup> strange as it may seem, was sometimes present in the behaviour of Averintsev's admirers. As Bibikhin writes, 'A large number of young ladies confessed their love to Averintsev, one of them sat on the steps in front of his apartment all night.'<sup>180</sup>

Public lectures gave Averintsev unusually wide public recognition for a Soviet academic, but they did not enable him to work regularly with students, to pass down his research approach to them and to shape their intellectual style. Unlike Losev, however, Averintsev seemingly had no desire to gather his admirers into a circle and turn them into disciples or followers. He acted more as a public intellectual addressing a large, mostly anonymous audience than as a Teacher at the centre of a *kruzhok*, whose members are connected by strong personal relationships. This strategy allowed Averintsev to become a cult figure, perceived by his admirers as unique in Soviet academia. Yet, it also prevented the formation of a school, the academic institutionalisation of his approach to cultural research, or the inheritance of his charisma. Without this social infrastructure, his cult gradually faded in the changing intellectual landscape of post-Soviet Russia, as the next section analyses.

### **The Decline of the Intellectual Cult**

Sergei Averintsev spent the last ten years of his life (1994–2004) abroad as Professor of Slavonic Studies at the University of Vienna.<sup>181</sup> It would appear that he wanted to expand his intellectual influence beyond Russia — by the first half of the 1990s, he was already actively giving guest lectures and participating in conferences in France, Germany, and the United

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<sup>179</sup> Ibid, 105–107.

<sup>180</sup> Bibikhin, *Aleksei Fedorovich Losev. Sergei Sergeevich Averintsev*, 394.

<sup>181</sup> See the list of his lecture courses: "Kursy lektsii, pročitannye S.S. Averintsevym v Venskom universitete," in *Averintsev i Mandel'shtam: Stat'i i materialy*, ed. Dzhamilia Mamedova (RGGU, 2011), 300–305.

Kingdom.<sup>182</sup> He developed particularly close relations with colleagues in Italy<sup>183</sup> and Ukraine.<sup>184</sup> Another important reason for the relocation was his health. In 1991–92, Averintsev suffered from a severe illness, which required two surgical operations in Germany.<sup>185</sup> After that, as Olga Sedakova writes, ‘he had to “live next door to his doctor,” in a place where he could rely on necessary medical help.’<sup>186</sup>

Although the position in Vienna granted him a comfortable life and access to excellent medical care, it also meant a loss of prestige. Whereas in Russia, he had been a cult figure, an intellectual star on par with Iurii Lotman or Dmitrii Likhachev, in Vienna, he was merely one among many professors. According to Edgar Leitan, who studied at the University of Vienna in the mid-1990s, Averintsev did not particularly impress local students:

The lack of adequate interlocutors, or perhaps true students, was evident in everything. [...] During his ‘consultation hours,’ no one gathered at the door of his office. Occasionally, a few students would show up, but mostly to deal with formal matters. [...] One of my acquaintances, a Russian studies student, once complained

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<sup>182</sup> Fedor Poljakov, slavist, Averintsev’s colleague, interview date: 16.11.2024. See also: Evgenii Pasternak, “Vystuplenie na vechere pamiati,” *Voprosy literatury*, no. 6 (2004): 25–27.

<sup>183</sup> In 1992, Averintsev was awarded the Honorary Doctorate of Ecclesiastical Studies by the Pontifical Oriental Institute, and in 1994, he became a member of Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences. “Serguei Averintsev,” The Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences, <https://www.pass.va/en/academicians/deceased/averintsev.html>.

About his public speeches in Italy see: Giuseppina Azzaro, “Sintezirovat’ budushchee,” in *Slovo Bozhie i slovo chelovecheskoe. Rimskie rechi*, by Sergei Averintsev (Nikeia, 2022), 18–49.

<sup>184</sup> In 1998, Averintsev became an Honorary Professor at the National University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy. In the late 1990s, the Kyiv publishing house *Dukh i Litera* launched the publication of Averintsev’s Collected Works, and several volumes came out. See the panegyric article on Averintsev on the publisher’s website: Konstantin Sigov, “Averintsev Sergei,” *Dukh i litera*, 2005, <https://duh-i-litera.com/averintsev-sergej>.

<sup>185</sup> Natalia Averintseva, his wife, writes: ‘The Rector of the Moscow State University, Viktor Antonovich Sadovnichii — my gratitude to him is boundless — appealed to the Russian and Moscow governments for help, and funds were immediately granted for two surgeries and the subsequent rehabilitation.’ Natalia Averintseva, “Slovo Natalii Petrovny Averintsevoi,” in *Slovo Bozhie i slovo chelovecheskoe. Rimskie rechi*, by Sergei Averintsev (Nikeia, 2022), 9. See also Bibikhin’s note of 16 July 1992: ‘Averintsev is arriving today from Bonn. They were literally thrown out of the hotel — the expensive one — because money from the Russian government had run out.’ Bibikhin, *Aleksei Fedorovich Losev. Sergei Sergeevich Averintsev*, 397.

<sup>186</sup> Sedakova, “S.S. Averintsev. Trudy i dni,” 90.

that Averintsev was ‘a terrible lecturer, and read very poorly.’ Barely holding back my irritation, I asked how this could be possible and how he could even make such a judgment. Well, he said, ‘too unsystematic,’ jumping from topic to topic, covering everything at once. [...] He offered his students magnificent improvisations, a sort of a brilliant oral ‘essay,’ with refined and original thoughts — and they expected a simple school-like ‘lesson’! How often I thought, regarding the audience, how unlucky Sergei Sergeevich was! In Moscow or Saint-Petersburg, it would have been impossible to gain access to him, and yet here...<sup>187</sup>

This account is supported by others. Averintsev himself would tell his Russian friends, as an anecdote, that once he had seen a student evaluation, highlighting two flaws: ‘1) completely fails to understand the significance of the feminist movement, and 2) often speaks unclearly.’<sup>188</sup> This ‘unclear’ speech may have been related to Averintsev’s illnesses (asthma, in particular),<sup>189</sup> but was probably more linked to his lecturing style. Fedor Poljakov, who worked with Averintsev at the University of Vienna in the late 1990s and later took over his position at the Department of Slavonic Studies, explained this to me in more detail:

I also spoke with him about this episode. Nowadays, this is done online. But in the past, students received paper sheets with questions. [...] These included whether the lecturer prepared well for classes, whether he missed them, and so on. Students could mention if he spoke unclearly, yes. [...] He was very keen to give his lectures to the highest standard and did not fully trust his German — although he had an excellent command of the language, even with a certain degree of literary archaism — so he prepared meticulously and wrote down the lectures (or rather, his wife typed

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<sup>187</sup> Edgar Leitan, “Averintsev v Vene,” Wikireading, 2008, <https://biography.wikireading.ru/306952>.

<sup>188</sup> Bocharov, “Averintsev v nashei istorii.” See also: Bibikhin, *Aleksei Fedorovich Losev. Sergei Sergeevich Averintsev*, 411-412.

<sup>189</sup> “[In autumn,] various ailments worsened (asthma, his heart condition, and who knows what else), and his condition was clearly felt by the listeners. It was difficult for him to give lectures...” Edgar Leitan, “Averintsev v Vene.”

them). Of course, eventually he would abandon the paper; he would follow his associations, and his thoughts would take flight...<sup>190</sup>

Students at the University of Vienna were unwilling or unable to appreciate this stream of associations and abundance of cultural references that had once fascinated the Russian public, and Averintsev, in turn, despite preparing meticulously, did not wish to adapt his lecturing style for a different audience. In the Viennese émigré community, there were a few people who perceived Averintsev as a cult figure: Leitan mentions an ‘elderly art historian’ from St Petersburg, who attended Averintsev’s special courses,<sup>191</sup> and Poljakov recalls two or three ‘Moscow-looking’ listeners, including an elderly artist who, as was later reported to Averintsev, said shortly before her death, ‘How can I die, when Sergei Sergeevich is lecturing right now?’<sup>192</sup> However, although Averintsev received the reverence of these few admirers with pleasure,<sup>193</sup> it was, of course, a mere shadow of his former glory.

This made it all the more important for him not to sever ties with the Russian intellectual world. Averintsev not only visited Moscow from time to time to read a lecture or give a sermon but also held a position at Moscow State University. He was in charge of a small Department of Christian Culture at the Institute of World Culture at MSU, which had been established in the early 1990s, during the institutionalisation of ‘culturology,’ and which brought together many prominent figures of Soviet humanities (its Head was famous linguist and semiotician Viacheslav Ivanov, who by that time had already left Russia and held a professorship in Slavic Languages and Literatures at UCLA). Averintsev’s only associates were Olga Sedakova and Tatiana Borodai, and both told me in interviews that the Institute was largely a nominal structure. Sedakova recalls that Averintsev only managed to begin a research seminar on the reconstruction of the Aramaic text of the Gospels and was planning a collective work on the history of the main Christian concepts and images; however, due to his illness and

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<sup>190</sup> Fedor Poljakov, slavist, Averintsev’s colleague, interview date: 16.11.2024.

<sup>191</sup> Leitan, “Averintsev v Vene.”

<sup>192</sup> Fedor Poljakov, slavist, Averintsev’s colleague, interview date: 16.11.2024.

<sup>193</sup> Fedor Poljakov, slavist, Averintsev’s colleague, interview date: 16.11.2024.

departure, this project was never developed.<sup>194</sup> Borodai recalls Averintsev's plan to translate Thomas Aquinas's *Summa Theologiae*, which likewise remained unrealised.<sup>195</sup>

Despite that, it seems that the affiliation with Moscow State University itself remained important to him. Sedakova states that Averintsev did not consider his departure permanent, and that 'when he happened to be introduced as a professor at the University of Vienna, he would always add: "and of Moscow."' <sup>196</sup> Fedor Poljakov shared the same view, arguing that Averintsev regarded his apartment in Moscow as home:

I visited him. There were some bookshelves, but few books. I asked him, 'Where are your books?' He replied, 'They were left in Moscow.' And, in general, it was clear that in Vienna, he lived without a sense of permanence.<sup>197</sup>

This is indeed a telling detail, as Averintsev not only examined European culture through classical texts and discussed contemporary problems of Russian culture, pointing to the insufficiency of books (the limited availability of libraries, the shortage of literary and philosophical publications, etc.)<sup>198</sup> but also genuinely enjoyed reading and simply physically interacting with books: searching for them, leafing through them, studying and discussing them.<sup>199</sup> Therefore, the fact that he left his home library in Moscow, as well as his desire to maintain his affiliation with MSU, testify to his enduring sense of belonging to the world of the Russian intelligentsia. And yet, his departure from Russia certainly contributed to the gradual decline of his intellectual cult.

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<sup>194</sup> Olga Sedakova, poet and scholar, Averintsev's friend and colleague, interview date: 09.11.2024.

<sup>195</sup> Tatiana Borodai, philosopher, Averintsev's colleague at MSU, interview date: 10.12.2024. Later, her translation of the *Summa contra Gentiles* was published: Thomas Aquinas, *Summa protiv iazychnikov*, trans. Tatiana Borodai (Institut Sviatogo Fomy, 2004). Bibikhin also mentions Averintsev's translation plans. Bibikhin, *Aleksei Fedorovich Losev. Sergei Sergeevich Averintsev*, 376.

<sup>196</sup> Olga Sedakova, poet and scholar, Averintsev's friend and colleague, interview date: 09.11.2024.

<sup>197</sup> Fedor Poljakov, slavist, Averintsev's colleague, interview date: 16.11.2024.

<sup>198</sup> Averintsev, *Popytki ob"iasnit'sia. Besedy o kul'ture*, 32–36.

<sup>199</sup> Edgar Leitan describes in detail his encounters with Averintsev in the second-hand bookshop 'Antik Keller' in Vienna, imbued with bibliophilic joy. Leitan, "Averintsev v Vene."

This decline was diagnosed by Averintsev's friends and admirers. Nina Braginskaia pointed it out immediately after his death,<sup>200</sup> and Olga Sedakova later documented it extensively.<sup>201</sup> In 2025, the publication of his collected works was tellingly described by its editors as an effort to resume the work on Averintsev's legacy and bring him back 'into the circle of our living interlocutors';<sup>202</sup> in other words, it was an attempt to make him relevant again and reconsolidate his diffused symbolic capital. All my informants unanimously agree that, in the post-Soviet period, Averintsev's status as an indisputable intellectual authority gradually waned — he appears to have fallen out of the intellectual agenda, features rarely in university curricula and textbooks, and is rarely cited in academic debates and even more rarely in political ones. Here is how Alexander Dobrokhotoev put it in our interview:

I remember that Natalia Petrovna [Averintsev's wife] asked me in a letter whether it was true that Averintsev was being forgotten in Russia. I somewhat emphatically replied that no, by no means. Later, however, I began to notice that, indeed, this was happening — his works were no longer read or cited. As a supervisor, I had to explain to my students who he was, although by that time they were already citing French philosophers...<sup>203</sup>

Aside from his departure abroad, there were, I would argue, three key factors that determined the decline of Averintsev's intellectual cult: the transformation of the intellectual environment; Averintsev's own intellectual strategy; and the lack of students and

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<sup>200</sup> 'He had remained silent for many months before his recent passing, and in his homeland, he had been gradually forgotten many years before his mournful demise.' Nina Braginskaia, "Pamiati Sergeia Sergeevicha Averintseva," in *Kentavr: Studia classica et mediaevalia*, by Nina Braginskaia (RGGU, 2004), 409.

<sup>201</sup> Olga Sedakova, "Averintsev v Evrope," in *Sergei Sergeevich Averintsev: Vospominaniia. Razmyshleniia. Posviashcheniia* (Sviato-Filaretovskii pravoslavno-khristianskii institut, 2020), 262-263. See also: Sedakova, "S.S. Averintsev. Trudy i dni," 94; «Sergei Averintsev ponimal serdtsem». *Razgovor o velikom uchenom*, (Peredelkino Dom tvorchestva, 2025), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ay6vZ8Ai6z4>.

<sup>202</sup> Egor Agafonov, "Vse khristiane dolzhny pomnit': Dukh zhivotvorit, a bukva ubivaet," Gorky, January 29, 2025, <https://gorky.media/context/vse-hristiane-dolzhny-pomnit-duh-zhivotvorit-a-bukva-ubivaet>. See also: Sedakova, "«Ponimanie kak vzgliad ne v zerkalo, a v okno»."

<sup>203</sup> Aleksandr Dobrokhotoev, philosopher close to Losev's *kruzhok* and Averintsev's colleague at MSU; interview date: 17.11.2024.

followers who were willing to comment on, elaborate on, and promote his ideas after his death. First and foremost, it was the post-Soviet transformation of the intellectual world. Averintsev's exceptional popularity was tied to his role as a cultural hero, that is, a mediator who provided Soviet audiences with access to 'true' culture. However, in the 1990s, this mediating position started to lose relevance: on the one hand, Russian intellectuals gained access to contemporary Western thought, and on the other, Soviet mainstream disappeared and its alternatives were also no longer in demand. They lost their aura of uniqueness, since in the new intellectual market, they had to compete not with boring official Marxism but with a wide variety of contemporary theories and approaches. Losev's followers, as shown in the previous chapter, managed to present him as 'the last philosopher of the Silver Age' and to fuel interest in him as part of the wave of new or revived literature (which is why it is primarily his texts from the 1920s, rather than those from the 1960s–80s, that have entered the Russian intellectual canon); by contrast, Averintsev remained too closely associated with the late Soviet context. Dobrokhotov implicitly points to this change in the excerpt from the interview cited above: his students, who were familiar with French philosophers but not with Averintsev, followed intellectual fashion and at the same time no longer required a mediator to introduce them to new theories, since the primary sources were available to them (both in the original and in numerous Russian translations<sup>204</sup>).

Averintsev was acutely aware of this *Zeitgeist* shift. In his 1996 article 'My Nostalgia' [*Moia nostalg'iia*], he wrote that, despite trying not to idealise any 'good old times,' he nevertheless felt nostalgia for a time when 'everything in the human world meant something,' that is, when people, guided by grand ideas and values, earnestly upheld them or sought to realise

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<sup>204</sup> On the translations and reception of French philosophers, see: Irina Blaubeck et al., "The Reception of the Western Thought in Contemporary Russian Philosophy," *Studies in East European Thought* 66, no. 3/4 (2014): 277–97; Alexander Bikbov, "A Strange Defeat: The Reception of Pierre Bourdieu's Works in Russia," *Sociologica* 8, nos. 2–3 (2009); Aleksandr Dmitriev, "Russkie pravila dlia frantsuzskoi teorii: opyt 1990-kh godov," in *Respublika slovesnosti. Frantsiia v mirovoi intellektual'noi kul'ture*, ed. Sergei Zenkin (Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie, 2005), 177–188; Natalia Avtonomova, "Déconstruction et traduction: sur la réception de Derrida en Russie," *revue ITER*, no. 2 (2020), <https://revue-iter.org/natalia-s-avtonomova-deconstruction-et-traduction-sur-la-reception-de-derrida-en-russie/>.

them.<sup>205</sup> Averintsev's nostalgia was a form of reflective nostalgia in Svetlana Boym's terms, one that 'dwells on the ambivalences of human longing and belonging and does not shy away from the contradictions of modernity.'<sup>206</sup> However, for Averintsev, this experience led to a conservative cultural critique. Written when he was already in Vienna, this article offered a diagnosis of both post-Soviet Russia and Western cultures.

In our times, all aspects of antiphilistinism, 'sex revolution' + left ideology + 'feminism' + literary and journalist belligerence and so on, completely merged with philistinism, became not only compatible with it, but identical to it. Soviet society, which created a type of philistinism based on revolutionary rhetoric a long time ago, was not entirely wrong when it believed that it was showing the way to the rest of the world.<sup>207</sup>

Disgust at philistinism, long characteristic of the Russian intelligentsia, for Averintsev became the core of a right-wing political and religious critique of the contemporary world but at the same time, an expression of disappointment with intellectual fashion (leftist thought, feminism) and with the mass audience that expected 'one-dimensional formulas,' rather than deep and sophisticated studies.<sup>208</sup> Thus, Averintsev experienced his own untimeliness and reflected on his misalignment with the academic and public agenda of the 1990s as a general disappearance of 'significance' and 'seriousness' from contemporary life.

The second factor in the decline of Averintsev's cult was his own intellectual strategy. As I have already discussed, Averintsev worked 'at the crossroads': firstly, he focused his studies on cultural intersections, i.e. collisions and syntheses of cultures (in particular, between Ancient Greece and the Ancient Near East); secondly, he positioned himself at disciplinary intersections, combining philological analysis, philosophical generalisations, and theological insights. This strategy perfectly matched his role as a guide to other cultural

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<sup>205</sup> Sergei Averintsev, "Moia nostalg'gii," in *Sviaz'vremen* (Dukh i Litera, 2005), 398–399.

<sup>206</sup> Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (Basic Books, 2001), xviii.

<sup>207</sup> Averintsev, "Moia nostalg'gii," 406.

<sup>208</sup> In more detail see the next section.

worlds, or a cultural hero, bringing the ‘treasures of European culture’ to an educated audience. His strategy, therefore, was to establish links in different areas of intellectual production between cultures, scholarly disciplines, and genres of public speech (academic research, educational outreach, and religious preaching). In the late Soviet period, Averintsev’s ability to connect different subjects, methods, and genres, creating a compelling alternative to the Soviet academic mainstream and endowing intellectual work with deep existential meaning, was perceived by admirers as a unique talent that made an exceptionally strong impression on his audience.<sup>209</sup> However, in post-Soviet times, these connections and linkages were regarded with increasing scepticism: both by specialists, who saw Averintsev’s work as not only insufficiently rigorous but also lacking in originality,<sup>210</sup> and younger generations of the educated public, who were no longer in a situation of intellectual deficit caused by ideological restrictions and censorship, and therefore had less need for such a type of cultural mediator.

Meticulously developing the rhetorical techniques of his lectures and refining the literary style of his writings, Averintsev sought to emotionally impact his listeners and readers. However, unlike Losev, who gathered students and followers around him, he was not interested in creating a *kruzhok*. My informants revealed that after his lectures, Averintsev did not continue discussions in an informal environment with elected students or loyal followers.<sup>211</sup> Sedakova, for example, recalls that ‘there were no serious discussions about what he just presented,’ but some of the admirers rushed forward ‘just to touch him.’<sup>212</sup> Therefore, Averintsev played the role of an intellectual star, graciously receiving the adoration of the audience, rather than primarily that of a Teacher, instructing students and

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<sup>209</sup> See, for example, how Sedakova writes about it: Sedakova, “S.S. Averintsev. Trudy i dni,” 55–59.

<sup>210</sup> While Alexey Muravyev stressed that working with Averintsev as a supervisor was important and beneficial for him, he also argued that ‘You take three dozen European books, and they say more or less the same thing [as *The Poetics of Early Byzantine Literature*], only in a drier and more neutral language.’ Alexey Muravyev, historian, Averintsev’s doctoral student, interview date: 05.12.2024.

<sup>211</sup> Nikolai Shaburov, historian, listener of Averintsev’s lectures, interview date: 17.11.2024; Olga Sedakova, poet and scholar, Averintsev’s friend and colleague, interview date: 09.11.2024.

<sup>212</sup> Olga Sedakova, poet and scholar, Averintsev’s friend and colleague, interview date: 09.11.2024.

shaping their intellectual skills, and sometimes also their moral beliefs and cultural preferences.

My informants, in fact, find it difficult to name even a single person who could be considered not just Averintsev's admirer, but a true successor, who could reproduce his intellectual style. Fedor Poljakov suggests that in Vienna, he wanted his students to engage with Russian literary studies, but not to adopt his research approach: 'You could listen to him or read his texts for a long time, but it was extremely difficult to understand his way of working. [...] He didn't want to be a bank giving credits.'<sup>213</sup> This view is supported by the testimony of historian Alexey Muravyev, one of the few graduate students who wrote his dissertation under Averintsev's supervision in the early 1990s, and who tells me that his supervision was conscientious but not directive, as he never edited texts but only either approved or rejected something wholesale.<sup>214</sup> Averintsev's reluctance to 'give credits' apparently entailed not only his unwillingness to come into conflict with colleagues on behalf of his students, but also his desire to remain an exceptional figure in the Russian intellectual landscape and to concentrate his symbolic capital, rather than pass it, even in part, to students and followers. If so, he largely succeeded. For instance, Valentin Asmus, an Orthodox priest, who was also a graduate of the Faculty of Philology at Moscow State University and Averintsev's acquaintance since the 1960s, said at the presentation of the first volume of his collected works in March 2025 that Averintsev had not created a school 'by the very nature of his talent' — that is, because he was too unique and polymathic a thinker.<sup>215</sup> The flipside of this uniqueness, however, turned out to be an (almost) complete absence of those who could or would want to devote themselves to his canonisation after his death.

This, in fact, was the third factor in the decline of his intellectual cult: the insufficiency of his admirers' efforts to secure his place in the Russian intellectual canon. Compared to Aleksei Losev's students and followers, who during the 1990s and 2000s did impressive collective

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<sup>213</sup> Fedor Poljakov, slavist, Averintsev's colleague, interview date: 16.11.2024.

<sup>214</sup> Alexey Muravyev, historian, Averintsev's doctoral student, interview date: 05.12.2024.

<sup>215</sup> «Sergei Averintsev ponimal serdtsem». *Razgovor o velikom uchenom*.

work on (re)publishing and commenting on his texts, creating memorial institutions, and actively engaging with his intellectual legacy, Averintsev's admirers did almost nothing in this vein. For two decades after his death, his books were scarcely published: in 2005, *The Other Rome* [*Drugoi Rim*], a collection of articles and essays from the 1970s–90s on Byzantine history and Christian culture, was published; in the same year, the Kyiv publishing house *Dukh i Litera* issued the last collection of essays he had prepared in his lifetime, *The Link of Times* [*Sviaz' vremen*]; in 2007, the same publisher released a Ukrainian translation of the collection of Averintsev's encyclopaedic entries *Sophia–Logos*; in 2011, a volume *Averintsev and Mandel'shtam* came out, bringing together his essays on Osip Mandel'shtam's poetry; and in 2013, the collection of his religious and political speeches *The Word of God and the Word of Human: Roman Speeches* [*Slovo Bozhie i slovo chelovecheskoe. Rimskie rechī*] was published. Some memoirs<sup>216</sup> and scholarly works<sup>217</sup> on Averintsev appeared during that time, yet their number was nowhere near the hundreds of publications on Losev. The only striking exception was (and remains) Olga Sedakova, cited repeatedly in this chapter, who produced many insightful — though highly partial — texts about Averintsev, and who continues to insist on the relevance of his thought in the contemporary intellectual situation. Finally, hardly anyone promoted Averintsev's work in Western academia, and consequently, despite his own efforts in the last decade of his life, his name never became well known in the Western scholarly world.<sup>218</sup>

Neither did Averintsev's widow, Natalia Averintseva (b. 1939), take the lead in the canonisation of her late husband, unlike Aza Takho-Godi. On the one hand, she did not have

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<sup>216</sup> Renata Galtseva, ed., *In memoriam: Sergei Averintsev* (INION RAN, 2004); Bibikhin, *Aleksei Fedorovich Losev. Sergei Sergeevich Averintsev*; Dzhamilia Mamedova, ed., *Averintsev i Mandel'shtam: Stat'i i materialy* (RGGU, 2011), 171–217; Galtseva, *Pamiatnoe*; Olga Sedakova, *Sergei Sergeevich Averintsev: Vospominaniia. Razmyshleniia. Posviashcheniia* (Sviato-Filaretovskii pravoslavno-khristianskii institut, 2020).

<sup>217</sup> For example: Konstantin Sigov, ed., *Lichnost' i traditsiia. Averintsevskie chteniia* (Dukh i Litera, 2005); Dobrokhoto, "Averintsev kak filosof kul'tury"; Gennadii Kvitkov, "Averintsev kak istorik kul'tury" (Dissertatsiia na soiskanie uchenoi stepeni kandidata istoricheskikh nauk, Tomsk State University, 2013).

<sup>218</sup> The only monograph on Averintsev, I was able to find, is a book by Jean-Noël Benoit. This work, however, mostly retells Russian texts for a French-speaking audience rather than offering an original study. Jean-Noël Benoit, *Serguei Averintsev: une autre dissidence* (Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2023).

such substantial academic resources and connections as Takho-Godi, who for decades not only managed Losev's *kruzhok* but was also the Head of the Department of Classic Philology at MSU. On the other hand, having spent many years in domestic labour, Natalia Averintseva seemingly did not wish to devote the rest of her life to her husband's legacy.<sup>219</sup> She did not write about her husband's life and ideas like Takho-Godi did, limiting herself to only a few brief introductory remarks.<sup>220</sup> For a long time, she did not seek to (re)publish Averintsev's texts — and later, although she consented to the publication of his collected works, for some reason she refused to grant access to his archive.<sup>221</sup> Meanwhile, the publication of, for example, Averintsev's Vienna lectures could have offered a wealth of new material for researchers. Apparently, Natalia Averintseva has her own views on what should be published from her husband's works and on how he should be written about; however, although these views might have affected some personal relations, they did not consolidate, as in Takho-Godi's case, into a strategy of promoting or censoring different narratives.

Thus, the decline of Averintsev's cult was determined by the post-Soviet transformation of the intellectual environment and his departure from Russia in the 1990s, and, perhaps more importantly, by his own intellectual strategy and the lack of followers willing to promote his ideas after his death. And yet Averintsev's name has not been forgotten — it remains well known among Russian scholars, not only specialists in early Christianity and Byzantium but also many academics who were students in the late Soviet period and whose intellectual

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<sup>219</sup> Vladimir Bibikhin, *Aleksei Fedorovich Losev. Sergei Sergeevich Averintsev*, 329–330, 337. In one of her rare interviews, she says that she not only cleaned and cooked but even bought shirts and ties for him. “[Interview with] Natalia Petrovna Averintseva,” *Radio “Grad Petrov,”* n.d., accessed December 5, 2025, <https://www.grad-petrov.ru/broadcast/natalya-petrovna-averintseva/>.

<sup>220</sup> Averintseva, “Slovo Natalii Petrovny Averintsevoi,” 7–10; Natalia Averintseva, “K chitateliu,” in *Sobranie sochinenii. Tom 1. Antichnost’*, by Sergei Averintsev (Izdatel'stvo PSTGU, 2024), vii–viii.

<sup>221</sup> ‘As for the eagerly awaited “first publications,” I would like to clarify a few things, so that everyone knows what to expect and what not to expect from the Collected Works. Unfortunately, we do not currently have direct access to Sergei Sergeevich's archive. Therefore, our collection is based on Averintsev's published texts.’ Egor Agafonov, personal email from December 10, 2004.

It is worth mentioning that on the crowdfunding platform ‘Planeta,’ where the first volume of the Collected Works raised 582,800 roubles (even slightly more than the stated goal), the description claimed that the publishers ‘hope for the potential first publication of archival materials.’ “Pervyi tom sobraniia sochinenii Sergieia Averintseva,” Planeta.ru, December 28, 2023, <https://planeta.ru/campaigns/207359>.

formation took place when his star was at its zenith. Moreover, as we shall see in the next section, Averintsev's public activity remains important for the Russian Orthodox Church, which seeks to preserve and use his symbolic capital.

## The Public Intellectual

At the end of the 1980s, the Soviet Union saw a rapid transformation of the public sphere: first, controlled *glasnost*, and then full freedom of speech.<sup>222</sup> In these conditions, prominent members of the Soviet intelligentsia gained new, and far greater, opportunities to present themselves as public intellectuals — that is, as people not merely engaged in intellectual work but also going beyond their professional expertise and addressing the general public, commenting on public issues, voicing social criticism, and participating in political debates.<sup>223</sup> Christophe Charle's classic study links the formation of the French intellectuals as a distinct social group to the Dreyfus Affair (1890s), which became a moment of collective political intervention by writers, journalists, and academics, who developed a new mode of political action.<sup>224</sup> The emergence of Russian public intellectuals in the late 1980s and early 1990s was somewhat similar.<sup>225</sup> Representatives of the late Soviet intelligentsia, freed from doctrinal control, claimed their autonomy and — as moral authorities and defenders of culture — their right to publicly criticise the Party, the state and the political elites, and to guide social change.

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<sup>222</sup> See on political context of the transformation of the public sphere: Timur Atnashev, "Perekliuchaia rezhimy publichnosti: kak Nina Andreeva sodeistvovala prevrashcheniiu glasnosti v svobodu slova," *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie*, no. 3 (2018), <https://magazines.gorky.media/nlo/2018/3/pereklyuchaya-rezhimy-publichnosti-kak-nina-andreeva-sodejstvovala-prevrashheniyu-glasnosti-v-svobodu-slova.html>.

<sup>223</sup> Richard A. Posner, *Public Intellectuals: A Study of Decline* (Harvard University Press, 2003), 17–35.

<sup>224</sup> Christophe Charle, *Birth of the Intellectuals: 1880–1900* (Polity, 2015), 112–132.

<sup>225</sup> On the public activity of intellectuals during Perestroika, see: Timur Atnashev, "Transformation of the Political Speech under Perestroika. Rise and Fall of Free Agency in the Changing Idioms, Rules and Second-Order Statements of the Emerging Intellectual Debates (1985–1991)" (PhD in History, European University Institute, 2010), 92–164; Inna Kochetkova, *The Myth of Russian Intelligentsia: Old Intellectuals in the New Russia* (Routledge, 2010), 51–56, 111–117; Marina Peunova, "From Dissidents to Collaborators: The Resurgence and Demise of the Russian Critical Intelligentsia since 1985," *Studies in East European Thought* (Dordrecht) 60, no. 3 (2008): 231–50.

In this context, the case of Sergei Averintsev, an intellectual converting his cult status into recognition by a broader audience, participating in political debates, and seeking to influence public opinion, is particularly revealing. It was not so much his academic expertise as his image of a guide to other cultural worlds and his symbolic belonging to ‘high’ European culture, which made him an important public figure whose presence legitimised new academic, social, religious, and political organisations of that time. Yet, engaging in this turbulent public life, Averintsev did not change his *modus operandi*. He did not professionalise as an administrator or politician, but remained a scholar, acting within (and partially shaping) the post-Soviet public sphere. His political activity arose from his academic work and never ceased to be an intellectual practice focused on culture. The intellectual statement always remained the key form of political participation for him — even during his brief political career as a deputy of the Congress of People’s Deputies.

The Congress of People’s Deputies (CPD) was formally the highest organ of state power in the Soviet Union between 1989 and 1991.<sup>226</sup> Established at the final stage of Perestroika, it was intended to become a Soviet parliament and secure the implementation of democratic reforms; in practice, however, it instead accelerated the disintegration of the state. Mikhail Gorbachev, seeking to gain popular support as a political counterbalance to the Party apparatus,<sup>227</sup> paved the way for political competition, in which he ultimately lost. For the first time in Soviet history, the elections were competitive; 750 deputies were elected from each of the three categories: territorial constituencies, national constituencies, and all-Union public organisations. Among the latter, twenty deputies represented the Academy of Sciences of the USSR, including Sergei Averintsev.<sup>228</sup>

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<sup>226</sup> This organ has not yet received much scholarly attention. See, for example: Sarah Birch, “The Beginning of Choice: Elections to the Congress of People’s Deputies, 1989,” in *Elections and Democratization in Ukraine* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), 41–54; Vladimir N. Brovkin, “The Making of Elections to the Congress of People’s Deputies (CPD) in March 1989,” *The Russian Review (Stanford)* 49, no. 4 (1990): 417–442.

<sup>227</sup> Stephen Kotkin, *Armageddon Averted the Soviet Collapse, 1970–2000* (Oxford University Press, 2008), 75–76.

<sup>228</sup> See on the struggle for the election of pro-democratic candidates within the Academy of Sciences: Denis Ablayev, “Mezhregional’naia deputatskaia gruppа: stanovlenie, razvitie i itogi” (Dissertatsiia na soiskanie

Gasán Gusejnov, who at that time was Averintsev's colleague at the Institute of World Literature of the Academy of Sciences, told me in an interview about his participation in those elections:

I was one of two electors from the Institute of World Literature. Someone nominated me at the general meeting. They asked: 'Do you agree to run?' I said, 'Yes, I agree.' [...] Then all of us electors came to the main building of the Academy of Sciences, where a ballot was held. Sakharov won by a huge margin, and Averintsev also received quite a lot of votes — they both became people's deputies.

— *How did you perceive this at the time, when voting for Averintsev?*

I thought a new world was about to come, new prospects would open up, and everything would change. But it turned out that the army of old bureaucrats was so huge that we could not break through that layer. And then the Soviet Union collapsed.<sup>229</sup>

The status of a deputy gave Averintsev, along with many other prominent intellectuals, a chance to influence political processes. On the one hand, there were fellow academics among them, Andrei Sakharov and Dmitrii Likhachev, representatives of the liberal intelligentsia who sought to democratise the Soviet state and at the same time prevent social upheaval and ethnic conflicts.<sup>230</sup> On the other hand, there were nationalists, such as Valentin Rasputin and Viktor Astafiev, the village prose writers, who criticised the Communist Party yet rejected *glasnost* as 'open propaganda of sex, violence, and liberation

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uchenoi stepeni kandidata istoricheskikh nauk, Moskovskii gosudarstvennyi oblastnoi universitet, 2008), 57–62.

<sup>229</sup> Gasán Gusejnov, philologist, Losev's secretary and Averintsev's colleague; interview dates: 25 and 27.10.2024.

<sup>230</sup> Gennady Gorelik, *The World of Andrei Sakharov: A Russian Physicist's Path to Freedom* (Oxford University Press, 2005), 423–428; Vladislav Zubok, *The Idea of Russia: The Life and Work of Dmitry Likhachev* (I.B. Tauris, 2017), 187–195.

from all moral norms,<sup>231</sup> presenting themselves as defenders of the Russian people and, in particular, of the Russian peasantry.<sup>232</sup>

Averintsev's own political views were more complex and contradictory than these figures. In the late 1980s, he seems to have been a member of the liberal intelligentsia, who advocated for the freedom of conscience, supported Sakharov and joined the Inter-regional Deputies Group, a pro-democratic coalition that included 388 deputies led by Boris Yeltsin, Andrei Sakharov, Iurii Afanasyev, Gavriil Popov, and Viktor Palm (four of the five co-chairs were academics).<sup>233</sup> Yet already by the mid-1990s, he had shifted significantly to the right: he began criticising 'secularist liberalism' in his essays and denouncing — just like Rasputin — sex education as a form of imposed depravity.<sup>234</sup> At the same time, it would be wrong to suggest that Averintsev became a nationalist, since he did not abandon democratic principles and never drew xenophobic conclusions from his cultural critique. Rather, he brought these two political discourses together, occupying an intermediate position. A decade later, at the very end of his life, Averintsev summarised his political evolution as follows:

Until I was able to observe modern European life at close quarters, I liked the word 'liberal,' sanctified for Russian ears by Pushkin, much more than the word 'democrat,' profaned by phrases such as 'people's democracy,' and I did not understand why modern Catholics, declaring themselves to be committed to democracy, were so wary of 'liberalism.' Now I see things differently and regard the programme of

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<sup>231</sup> *Pervyi s"ezd narodnykh deputatov SSSR: 25 maia — 9 iiunia 1989 g. Stenograficheskii otchet*, vol. 2 (Izдание Verkhovnogo Soveta SSSR, 1989), 455. See also Bibikhin's account of Averintsev's reaction to Rasputin's speech: 'Despite my complete horror of Rasputin, at one point — when he spoke about the partocracy — I nevertheless applauded him. And at another point, I demonstratively did not clap.' Vladimir Bibikhin, *Aleksei Fedorovich Losev. Sergei Sergeevich Averintsev*, 385–386.

<sup>232</sup> Erin M. Hutchinson, "The Cultural Politics of the Nation in the Soviet Union After Stalin, 1953–1991," Doctoral dissertation (Harvard University, 2020), 509–512.

<sup>233</sup> Ablaev, "Mezhregional'naia deputatskaia gruppa: stanovlenie, razvitie i itogi," 93–99.

<sup>234</sup> Sergei Averintsev, "O dukhe vremeni i chuvstve iumora," in *Sviaz' vremen* (Dukh i Litera, 2005), 416–417.

universal re-education of humanity initiated by modern liberalism as a threat to democracy, and I feel — imagine that! — that I am on the side of democracy.<sup>235</sup>

This political evolution, from intelligentsia liberalism to political Christianity, can be traced first through Averintsev's career as a deputy in the late 1980s and then through his political journalism of the 1990s and early 2000s. Unfortunately, Averintsev's short deputy career remains largely unknown. Even his admirers pay little attention to it. Olga Sedakova, for instance, barely mentions his parliamentary activity as a continuation and explication of 'those intentions that readers previously absorbed from his scholarly works.'<sup>236</sup> The only point often mentioned is that Averintsev took part in drafting the Law on Religious Freedom (25 October 1990), which guaranteed Soviet citizens the right to freely profess religion and perform religious rites.<sup>237</sup> Unfortunately, during this research, I was unable to find informants willing to share with me details of his work as a deputy.<sup>238</sup>

There is really only one story about Averintsev as a deputy that is repeatedly mentioned in the accounts of his friends and admirers.<sup>239</sup> At the ninth session of the first Congress, on 2 June 1989, a scandal erupted over an interview given by Andrei Sakharov, who not only described the war in Afghanistan as a 'criminal adventure,' but also, referring to foreign radio broadcasts, reported on secret orders to shoot Soviet soldiers to prevent them from being captured.<sup>240</sup> A storm of outraged accusations of insulting the Soviet Army fell upon Sakharov. The criticism was initiated by Sergei Chervonopisskii, a veteran of the Afghan campaign who

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<sup>235</sup> Sergei Averintsev, "Solidarnost' pokolenii kak faktor grazhdanskoi svobody," in *Sviaz' vremeni* (Dukh i Litera, 2005), 420.

<sup>236</sup> Sedakova, "S.S. Averintsev. Trudy i dni," 86.

<sup>237</sup> For example: Bocharov, "Averintsev v nashei istorii"; Sedakova, "S.S. Averintsev. Trudy i dni," 86; Asmus, "Sergei Sergeevich Averintsev: filolog, filosof, bogoslov," 77.

<sup>238</sup> It would be interesting to examine this episode using archival materials. However, since this research focuses on Averintsev's public image as a cult figure, I leave this subject for future work.

<sup>239</sup> Bocharov, "Averintsev v nashei istorii"; Bibikhin, *Aleksei Fedorovich Losev. Sergei Sergeevich Averintsev*; Sedakova, "S.S. Averintsev. Trudy i dni," 385–386.

<sup>240</sup> *Pervyi s"ezd narodnykh deputatov SSSR: 25 maia — 9 iyunia 1989 g. Stenograficheskii otchet*, vol. 2, 346–347.

had lost both legs in action and later became a Komsomol official in Ukraine. He appealed to people to combat the discrediting of the army and ended his fiery speech as follows:

I am a convinced opponent of slogans and hypocrisy. But there are three words for which, I believe, we must all fight together — these are: State, Motherland, Communism. (*Applause. Deputies rise.*)<sup>241</sup>

Averintsev told his friends that at that moment only seven people in the entire hall remained seated, and in his section, only he and Iurii Vlasov,<sup>242</sup> the famous weightlifter and Olympic champion (1960), did not rise. This gesture of support for Sakharov and commitment to democratic principles — against ingrained habits of public behaviour and immense social pressure — was important both for Averintsev himself and for his friends.<sup>243</sup> Moreover, it was simply a striking image: a man of exceptional strength and a man of exceptional intellect, united by mutual respect, defying the crowd. This was a symbolic act, demonstrating human dignity rather than pragmatic political calculation and, as far as we can tell from Bibikhin's note (dated 15 June 1989, that is, less than two weeks after the events), Averintsev himself saw it that way. This note is rather obscure, but Averintsev's characterisation of his own parliamentary activity is revealing:

It is astonishing to what extent we are not going to do anything. [...] I have to write about ten still-unwritten parliamentary inquiries. Hopeless, of course, but *victa causa placuit Catoni*. The results may even be good, better than we realise, only they are not where we are looking for them.<sup>244</sup>

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<sup>241</sup> Ibid, 344.

<sup>242</sup> Iurii Vlasov was elected from the Liublino district of Moscow. In his speech at the Congress (31 May 1989), he sharply criticised the Soviet state and the KGB in particular. Ibid, 77–84.

<sup>243</sup> Bocharov, "Averintsev v nashei istorii"; Bibikhin, *Aleksei Fedorovich Losev. Sergei Sergeevich Averintsev*; Sedakova, "S.S. Averintsev. Trudy i dni," 385–386.

<sup>244</sup> Bibikhin, *Aleksei Fedorovich Losev. Sergei Sergeevich Averintsev*, 384.

In this conversation with Bibikhin, Averintsev cites the verse ‘*Victrix causa diis placuit, sed victa Catoni*’ (I, 128) — ‘The victorious cause pleased the gods, but the defeated one pleased Cato’ — from Lucan’s epic poem *Pharsalia*, which recounts the civil war between Julius Caesar and Gnaeus Pompey. In other words, virtue is more valuable than victory: although gods favour the victorious, the defeated may still preserve dignity, and thus please Cato the Younger, the Roman senator praised as a symbol of moral integrity in politics. In essence, this is a highbrow version of the famous dissident toast ‘To the success of our hopeless cause!’ — expressing a distinctive sentiment of the Russian intelligentsia, a ‘blend of moral passion and fatalism,’ as Benjamin Nathans puts it.<sup>245</sup>

Averintsev shared this sentiment, as shown, for instance, by his speech, never delivered but prepared and published in the collection of transcripts from the first Congress of People’s Deputies. He started it with praise for Sakharov, ‘who did what we did not: he had begun to speak without waiting for permission,’ and with an appeal to adopt a declaration condemning all forms of persecution for political or religious beliefs, and to review criminal cases of political prisoners.<sup>246</sup> Rather like the dissidents studied by Nathans, Averintsev was by no means a ‘Western liberal caught on the wrong side of the Iron Curtain.’<sup>247</sup> His democratic views combined with deep religious faith, conservative moralism, scepticism toward the free market, and irritation with progressive movements. In Renata Galtseva’s memoirs, there is a notable passage showing that his advocacy for a ‘just and democratic’ law on freedom of conscience in the CPD<sup>248</sup> went hand in hand with a struggle against ‘permissiveness’ — at times, perhaps, even through censorship:

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<sup>245</sup> Benjamin Nathans, *To the Success of Our Hopeless Cause: The Many Lives of the Soviet Dissident Movement* (University Press, 2024), 623.

<sup>246</sup> *Pervyi s’ezd narodnykh deputatov SSSR: 25 maia — 9 iunia 1989 g. Stenograficheskii otchet*, vol. 4, 15–16.

<sup>247</sup> Nathans, *To the Success of Our Hopeless Cause*, 277.

<sup>248</sup> *Pervyi s’ezd narodnykh deputatov SSSR: 25 maia — 9 iunia 1989 g. Stenograficheskii otchet*, vol. 4, 16–18.

When Averintsev was at the Supreme Soviet [the Congress of People's Deputies], to my outcries about cultural decay and public moral corruption, that is, the issue he could raise, using his status, in the highest legislative body (as he did, passing the law on freedom of conscience), he said that he had thought about it and would try to discuss this matter. During a telephone conversation, we eventually developed criteria for censorship bans based on the following points: 1) sexual scenes; 2) display of naked intimate body parts; 3) obscene language. Averintsev submitted 11 applications to the Praesidium to speak about it, but he was not granted permission.<sup>249</sup>

In this respect Averintsev was somewhat similar to Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, who criticised both the Soviet regime and modern Western societies. The diagnosis of modernity that Solzhenitsyn offered in his famous Harvard Address (8 June 1978) — ‘We have lost the concept of a Supreme Complete Entity which used to restrain our passions and our irresponsibility [...] our spiritual life is trampled by the party mob in the East, by the commercial one in the West’<sup>250</sup> — anticipates the critique of liberalism, permissiveness, and the hedonism of modernity that Averintsev developed in the 1990s and articulated in his speech to the Italian Senate (25 March 2003).<sup>251</sup> Like Solzhenitsyn, Averintsev may be seen as a proponent of political Christianity: he insisted that politics should be grounded in Christian values.<sup>252</sup> And finally, like Solzhenitsyn, he remains a controversial figure, one too inconvenient to be used either by liberals or by nationalists. Combining what would ordinarily be considered as traits of the liberal intelligentsia (democratic beliefs, rationalism, and sympathy toward Catholicism) with those typical of right-wing intellectuals (religion-

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<sup>249</sup> Galtseva, *Pamiatnoe*.

<sup>250</sup> Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, “A World Split Apart,” *Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn Center*, June 8, 1978, <https://www.solzhenitsyncenter.org/a-world-split-apart>.

<sup>251</sup> Sergei Averintsev, “Dukhovnost' Vostochnoi Evropy i ee vklad v formirovanie novoi evropeiskoi identichnosti,” in *Slovo Bozhie i slovo chelovecheskoe. Rimskie rechi* (Nikeia, 2022).

<sup>252</sup> On Solzhenitsyn's political Christianity, see: Elisa Kriza, *Alexander Solzhenitsyn: Cold War Icon, Gulag Author, Russian Nationalist?: A Study of the Western Reception of His Literary Writings, Historical Interpretations, and Political Ideas* (Ibidem Verlag, 2014), 204–208.

based politics, criticism of feminism, and lamentations over the moral decline of contemporary society), Averintsev was not an easy candidate for political instrumentalisation. As Olga Sedakova told me emphatically in an interview, ‘Averintsev cannot be appropriated.’<sup>253</sup>

This does not mean, of course, that such attempts were never made. In the second half of the 2000s, not long after his death, some Russian politicians, too, tried to present him as a supporter of their causes. On one side of the political spectrum, Grigorii Iavlinskii, a liberal politician and leader of the opposition party *Yabloko*, wrote an article ‘Averintsev in Russian History,’ largely repeating Sedakova’s arguments but emphasising the liberating potential of Averintsev’s lectures.<sup>254</sup> On the other side, Sergei Kurginian, an ultraconservative and pro-Kremlin politician, wrote about Averintsev in the nationalist newspaper *Zavtra*, claiming that his essays on Bakhtin were a ‘quiet no’ to Perestroika and the destruction of Christian culture that, as he put it, ‘was designed and carried out by Bakhtin and his followers.’<sup>255</sup> Kurginian imposed his interpretation on Averintsev’s texts, turning (mainly through rhetorical exclamations<sup>256</sup>) what was in fact a rather respectful critique of Bakhtin<sup>257</sup> into a passionate defence of the soul of the Russian people. These examples show that, albeit infrequently, radically opposed political forces nevertheless sometimes tried to ‘appropriate Averintsev.’ In all the cases that I am aware of, however, they sought to exploit his symbolic capital as an

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<sup>253</sup> Olga Sedakova, poet and scholar, Averintsev’s friend and colleague, interview date: 09.11.2024.

<sup>254</sup> For example: ‘Language changed during the Thaw, yet even the new liberal language remained Soviet. From Averintsev we heard a different language, fundamentally different, and it was this language, rather than new knowledge, that truly changed his audience minds.’ Iavlinsky, “Averintsev v russkoi istorii.”

<sup>255</sup> Sergei Kurginian, “Krizis i drugie XXXIX,” *Zavtra*, November 11, 2009, <https://zavtra.ru/blogs/2009-11-1121>.

<sup>256</sup> For example: ‘Plebeian excesses of laughter (as well as gluttony, drunkenness, sex, and foul language — and who knows what else) plus the elitist savouring of hellish “eternal laughter.” Is this not the formula for our current existence that could well be called “Russian hell”?’ Ibid.

<sup>257</sup> Sergei Averintsev, “Bakhtin, smekh, khristianskaia kul'tura,” in *Sviaz' vremeni* (Dukh i Litera, 2005), 342–359; Sergei Averintsev, “Bakhtin i russkoe otnoshenie k smekhu,” in *Sviaz' vremeni* (Dukh i Litera, 2005), 360–365.

intellectual figure and attach a political meaning to his scholarly work, whether from a liberal or a 'patriotic' perspective.

This accords with the fact that Averintsev's political career remained only a brief episode, leaving almost no trace in his public image. He made no attempt to continue it after the dissolution of the Congress of People's Deputies, preferring instead to act in the role of a public intellectual, more familiar to him and considerably safer. Gusejnov even believes that Averintsev, 'a man of extraordinary intuition,' sensed the danger after Sakharov's death and therefore withdrew from politics quickly.<sup>258</sup> This does not mean, however, that he confined himself to the silence of his study. Political issues continued to trouble him, but he approached them more as a theorist than as a practitioner, fulfilling the 'duty' of intelligentsia, which he formulated in an interview in the late 1980s as 'feeling the painful problems of society, to discuss them, and to develop a culture of public discussion.'<sup>259</sup> He described himself as a man who 'thinks about culture, writes about culture, and tries, within the limits of his weak powers, to defend culture.'<sup>260</sup> In the 1990s and early 2000s, he remained faithful to this principle, in both cultural and political senses; on the one hand, he continued his scholarly work, and on the other, used the knowledge and authority gained from it to 'defend culture' in the public sphere.

This 'defence of culture' could take different forms. For example, as Pavel Polian, a scholar of Osip Mandel'stam's work, told me in an interview, Averintsev, the first Chair of the Mandel'shtam Society from 1991, supported certain cultural initiatives with his signature:

I relied on his authority — we approached various institutions, including the KGB, to obtain certain documents. I remember we fought against the currency exchange office in the Literary Institute building, and he wrote a letter about it. In the end, we

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<sup>258</sup> Gasan Gusejnov, philologist, Losev's secretary and Averintsev's colleague; interview dates: 25 and 27.10.2024.

<sup>259</sup> Averintsev, *Popytki ob"iasnit'sia. Besedy o kul'ture*, 37–39.

<sup>260</sup> Ibid, 39.

won. [...] There are two plaques on the building of the Literary Institute on Tverskoi Boulevard, one for Platonov and one for Mandel'shtam.<sup>261</sup> In 1992, they cut a window there and rented it out to some bank. Right next to the plaque was a window where you could exchange currency. It brought money to the Literary Institute, but it looked strange. I protested, and Sergei Sergeevich agreed with me. But Esin<sup>262</sup> argued with us and accused us of destroying Russian culture because the Institute would only exist with this money. I rarely engaged him in such initiatives, but he never declined.<sup>263</sup>

Of course — and this story captures it well — what some perceived as ‘defence of culture,’ others saw as an attack. Indeed, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, cuts in state funding forced cultural and educational institutions to look for unconventional ways to survive, including renting out their spaces to commercial organisations. Yet from the purist perspective, this expansion of the market was considered a threat to the very existence of cultural values.

The aspiration to defend traditional cultural values and hierarchies, to insist on the distinction and separation between the ‘high’ and the ‘low’ (as in the ‘defence’ of the Mandel'shtam plaque against its proximity to the currency exchange) was a recurrent thread in Averintsev's political writings of the 1990s and early 2000s, which provides a key to understanding how cultural issues become political. Addressing a wide range of subjects, Averintsev consistently expressed the same idea: every creative act requires a system of strict cultural forms and constraints that ascribe meaning to it — free verse depends on the existence of rhythmically organised poetry;<sup>264</sup> humour depends on seriousness;<sup>265</sup> political

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<sup>261</sup> 25 Tverskoi Boulevard, Moscow. In this former mansion of the Yakovlev family, known as the ‘Herzen House’ (Alexandr Herzen, the owner's nephew, was born there in 1812), Osip Mandel'shtam and his wife occupied a room in the early 1920s.

<sup>262</sup> Sergei Esin, writer and rector of the Gorky Literary Institute (1992–2005).

<sup>263</sup> Pavel Polian, Mandel'shtam scholar, interview date: 14.12.2024.

<sup>264</sup> Sergei Averintsev, “Ritm kak teoditseia,” in *Sviaz' vremeni* (Dukh i Litera, 2005), 408.

<sup>265</sup> Averintsev, “O dukhe vremeni i chuvstve iumora,” 413.

protest depends on conservative order;<sup>266</sup> and so forth. Without this dialectical unity of opposites, Averintsev argued, everything loses meaning — the destruction of cultural norms and restrictions leads to the decay of poetry, humour, and ‘serious’ politics. The same logic runs through his post-Soviet scholarly articles and political essays, the same critique of the simplification of complex cultural or political problems, and the same defence of traditional (religious) values and hierarchies, are reproduced, for example, in his analysis of Mandel’shtam’s poetry<sup>267</sup> and in his reflections on overcoming the totalitarian past.<sup>268</sup>

This logic is also at the core of his critique of liberalism, which, he claimed, imposes the rejection of all norms as a new norm.

The abolition of all taboos, especially in the sexual sphere; vulgar feminism, which de facto seeks to abolish precisely what is creative in women and destroys traditional respect for motherhood; the dismantling of all cultural hierarchies; the famous anti-elitist principle ‘you are no better than me’; the fundamental superiority of complacent ignorance over ‘Paideia’ [education] — all this already belongs, in Flaubert’s words, to the realm of *idées reçues*, ‘common truths,’ axioms accepted automatically and without criticism.<sup>269</sup>

Here, Averintsev places sexual prohibitions, traditional gender roles, cultural hierarchies, and social distinctions in the same list, thereby explicitly linking cultural and political positions. From his point of view, ‘ultra-secularist’ liberalism ceases to be liberal by the end of the twentieth century, since it imposes the rejection of tradition, thus eliminating true freedom of choice.<sup>270</sup> Of course, in this kind of critique, Averintsev was by no means alone:

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<sup>266</sup> Averintsev, “Moia nostal'giia,” 399–403.

<sup>267</sup> Sergei Averintsev, “Sud’ba i vest’ Osipa Mandel’shtama,” in *Averintsev i Mandel’shtam: Stat’i i materialy*, ed. Dzhamilia Mamedova (RGGU, 2011), 60–69.

<sup>268</sup> Averintsev, “Preodolenie totalitarizma kak problema: popytka orientatsii,” 394–397.

<sup>269</sup> Averintsev, “O dukhe vremeni i chuvstve iumora,” 416.

<sup>270</sup> Sergei Averintsev, “Bibleiskii obraz mudrosti kak al'ternativa «kul'ture smerti»,” in *Slovo Bozhie i slovo chelovecheskoe. Rimskie rechi* (Nikeia, 2022).

many right-leaning intellectuals in Western academia articulated similar ideas. For example, the British conservative philosopher Roger Scruton (1944–2020) articulates a similar criticism of liberalism and socialism, disdain for postmodernism, and the defence of the Western cultural canon and Christianity, among other things.<sup>271</sup>

Regarding sex as a ‘main object of structuring taboos,’ Averintsev addressed their abolition in his essay ‘Marriage and Family: An Untimely Experience of a Christian View of Things’ (1996). This text combines an emotional presentation of his personal beliefs with philosophical and theological reflections on the nature of family and the essence of love. These reflections are not particularly original either: sinful human nature requires sanctification; the lower, carnal element must be subordinated to the higher, spiritual one; love and procreation justify sexual life, and so on.<sup>272</sup> The lack of originality is deliberate — he sought to present Christian sexual morality as a common sense, a kind of sober pedantry, whose principles are as trivial as the idea that one should repair a broken watch instead of debating whether ‘the very notion of correct time is a dogmatic fiction.’<sup>273</sup> He also repeated his dialectical argument, claiming that by abolishing taboos, the sexual revolution stripped depravity of the appeal of forbidden fruit. Thus, Averintsev’s reflections on Christian sexual morality in fact lead his reader to the idea that Christianity is both a moral *and* a rational foundation of ‘true’ or ‘good’ culture (set against secularism in the same way that he had earlier opposed it to Soviet totalitarianism).<sup>274</sup>

Finally, in the early 2000s, Averintsev presented his political ideas to the European audience. As in the case of his lectures at the University of Vienna, he did not adapt to this new context but, in most cases, reproduced in his public talks and conference papers the same

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<sup>271</sup> Ferenc Horkay Hörcher, *Art and Politics in Roger Scruton’s Conservative Philosophy* (Springer International Publishing, 2023), 55–97.

<sup>272</sup> Sergei Averintsev, “Brak i sem’ia: nesvoevremennyi opyt khristianskogo vzgliada na veshchi,” in *Sofiia-Logos. Slovar’* (Dukh i Litera, 2006), 806–813.

<sup>273</sup> Ibid, 804–805.

<sup>274</sup> By ‘good’ culture he means a culture of complex propositions or, if one may put it this way, ‘but-propositions’ (for example, human nature is sinful, BUT it can be saved). See: Sergei Averintsev, *Dukhovnye slova* (Sviato-Filaretovskii pravoslavno-khristianskii institut, 2007), 183–184.

arguments he had formulated earlier in his Russian essays.<sup>275</sup> At times, he repeated himself down to small details: for instance, in 2001, in an article published in *Novyi mir*, he gave an example of an Indian man who set himself on fire in protest against a beauty contest,<sup>276</sup> and then repeated it almost verbatim a year later at a conference in Rome.<sup>277</sup> Perhaps the only innovation in his European speeches was the emergence of the ‘Russian theme.’ Averintsev engaged in a kind of cultural diplomacy, discussing the Soviet experience, Russian literature and philosophy, Orthodox spirituality and theology, and introducing Russian culture to his Western listeners — much as he had spent decades earlier introducing Western culture to Russian ones.

Thus, Averintsev used the opportunities for political participation that opened in the late 1980s and, alongside a number of prominent academics, became actively involved in public discussions of pressing social and cultural issues. His career as a deputy was rather short-lived; however, he strove to influence political processes as a public intellectual and a ‘defender of culture.’ An aspiration to occupy a middle ground, combining democratic views with conservative moralism, was a constant feature of his activity throughout the 1990s and early 2000s. In the next section, I examine how the same strategy governed his religious activity, from public speeches to Bible translations.

### **An Adversary of Secularism**

The key theme of Averintsev’s public speeches and essays in the early 2000s was overcoming modern secularism by returning to the Christian roots of European culture.<sup>278</sup> He

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<sup>275</sup> Compare the collections of works *Sviaz' vremen* and *Slovo Bozhie i slovo chelovecheskoe*.

<sup>276</sup> Apparently, it refers to an incident during the protests surrounding the Miss World 1996 in Bangalore, India. See: William Mazzarella, “Worlding Miss World, Bangalore, 1996,” *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power*, 23, no. 3 (2016): 295.

<sup>277</sup> Sergei Averintsev, “Preodolenie totalitarizma kak problema: popytka orientatsii,” in *Sviaz' vremen* (Dukh i Litera, 2005), 396; Sergei Averintsev, “Bibleiskii obraz mudrosti kak al'ternativa «kul'ture smerti»,” in *Slovo Bozhie i slovo chelovecheskoe. Rimskie rechi* (Nikeia, 2022).

<sup>278</sup> Sergei Averintsev, “«Ad fontes!» (Afiny, Ierusalim, Rim),” in *Slovo Bozhie i slovo chelovecheskoe. Rimskie rechi* (Nikeia, 2022).

fashioned himself as a Christian intellectual, convinced that ‘righteousness is an indispensable condition for intellectual subtlety, but intellectual subtlety is also an indispensable condition for true righteousness.’<sup>279</sup> As discussed above, he developed this position in the 1990s, when he no longer had to rely on various tricks and ploys to express his faith in academic texts (as he did in his entries for the *Philosophical Encyclopedia*) and was able to openly manifest his religiosity. At that time, he regularly assisted as an altar server and preached in churches where members of the *Preobrazhenskoe bratstvo* gathered,<sup>280</sup> and was also involved in religious education, alongside such representatives of the Church intelligentsia as Alexander Men and Andrei Kuraev.

Averintsev wrote articles and essays on religious topics, gave interviews, lectured, preached,<sup>281</sup> and even composed religious poetry.<sup>282</sup> In the 1990s, he became a formal member of various religious institutions. In 1990, he, as not only a well-known Christian intellectual but also a member of CPD, was elected the first president of the Bible Society of the Soviet Union (later the Russian Bible Society, RBS), an interconfessional organisation engaged in the distribution and translation of the Bible. He did not hold this position for long, and it appeared to be largely nominal.<sup>283</sup> In 1998, he became an honorary member of the RBS Board, which was more in line with this form of passive participation.<sup>284</sup>

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<sup>279</sup> Sergei Averintsev, “Premudrost' v Vetkhom Zavete,” in *Slovo Bozhie i slovo chelovecheskoe. Rimskie rechi* (Nikeia, 2022).

<sup>280</sup> Georgii Kochetkov, “Chudo lichnosti akademika Sergeia Averintseva,” in *Dukhovnye slova*, by Sergei Averintsev (Sviato-Filaretovskii pravoslavno-khristianskii institut, 2007), 6.

<sup>281</sup> Averintsev’s sermons of the 1990s and early 2000s draw on his philological work and political journalism, and although they generally remain within the genre of short religious and moral instructions addressed to the Church community, they stand out for their intellectualism and variety of reference (not only to religious texts, but also, for example, to Clive Staples Lewis or Viacheslav Ivanov). See the collection of his sermons: Sergei Averintsev, *Dukhovnye slova* (Sviato-Filaretovskii pravoslavno-khristianskii institut, 2007).

<sup>282</sup> Which, however, did not gain notable recognition. See the collection of poems: Sergei Averintsev, *Stikhotvoreniia i perevody* (Izdatel'stvo Ivana Limbakha, 2003).

<sup>283</sup> Innokentii Pavlov, “Ocherk istorii RBO,” *Rossiiskoe Bibleiskoe Obshchestvo*, 2011, <https://biblia.ru/AboutUs/AboutUs-GoalsAndHistory/AboutUs-BSRHistoryPavlova.html#Label18>.

<sup>284</sup> “Sergei Sergeevich Averintsev,” Sviato-Filaretovskii institut, <https://sfi.ru/tags/people/sergei-sergeevich-averintsev.html>.

Just as Averintsev occupied a position in between liberal and nationalist political discourses, he also tried to take a middle ground in religious life. Averintsev mediated between academia and the Church, using his intellectual authority for Christian missionary work. He also mediated between Christian churches, participating in dialogue with Catholics, becoming a member of the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences (1994) and a participant in the ‘Solov’ev Meetings’ [*Solov’evskie vstrechi*] with Pope John Paul II in 1995–1998,<sup>285</sup> as well as with Protestants. In 1995, he was awarded the Dr Leopold Lucas Prize by the Protestant Theological Faculty of the University of Tübingen,<sup>286</sup> ‘for his efforts aimed at a return to the Christian heritage and mutual rapprochement between peoples.’<sup>287</sup> Finally, he occupied a kind of intermediate position between a layman and a priest. On the initiative of priest Georgii Kochetkov, Averintsev, without becoming a priest, accepted the ecclesiastical rank of the reader, the lowest rank in the Orthodox clergy.<sup>288</sup> Olga Sedakova told me about this in an interview:

Father Georgii, who at that time [the 1990s] was very keen on innovative ideas, suggested that Sergei Sergeevich preach after the service. Lay people never preached in our church. Even deacons did not preach, although there are no canons on this matter. According to ancient canons, anyone with the gift of speech can be a preacher. But in order not to tease others too much, Father Georgii even made Sergei Sergeevich a reader. Therefore, he went out to preach in special vestments [sticharion, liturgical vestment worn by minor clergy].<sup>289</sup>

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<sup>285</sup> Olga Sedakova, “O Kazanskoi. Zapiski ochevidtsa,” Olga Sedakova, 2000, <http://olgasedakova.com/Moralia/1785>.

<sup>286</sup> “Previous Prizewinner,” University of Tübingen, 2025, <https://uni-tuebingen.de/en/faculties/protestant-theology/faculty/lucas-prize/prizewinner/previous-prizewinner/>.

<sup>287</sup> “Averintsev” in *Pravoslavnaia Entsiklopediia* (Pravoslavnaia entsiklopediia, 2000), 126.

<sup>288</sup> See Kochetkov’s account: *O Sergee Averintseve (k 85-letiiu) / Iurii Popov, sviashchennik Georgii Kochetkov / Nauki o cheloveke*, (Sviato-Filaretovskii institut, 2023), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EBAFxl2jMnA>.

<sup>289</sup> Olga Sedakova, poet and scholar, Averintsev’s friend and colleague, interview date: 09.11.2024.

The granting of this rank was significant both for Averintsev and his admirers. The term reader [chtets] simultaneously refers to religious service and intellectual practice, thus combining these key aspects of his self-presentation. Allegedly, he even asked for ‘Sergei Averintsev, reader’ to be written on his grave. This statement recurs across many sources<sup>290</sup> and has become so commonplace that in some cases it has turned into a fact: for example, an article about Averintsev on the website of the St. Philaret Institute ends with the words: ‘The inscription on the gravestone reads: “Sergei Averintsev, reader”’.<sup>291</sup> However, it is easy to verify that, in reality, Averintsev is buried alongside his parents at Danilovskoe Cemetery in Moscow; only their names and dates of birth and death are carved on a simple gravestone.

One of Averintsev’s lines of work as a Christian intellectual was translating and commenting on the Bible. Averintsev translated the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, the Book of Job, and the Psalms of David.<sup>292</sup> His versions were part of a whole wave of new Russian translations of the Bible that were made in the 1990s and 2000s, which were to satisfy the popular demand for an accessible text of the Scripture, as the language of the so-called Synodal Bible, completed in 1876, was archaic at the moment of its publication, let alone more than a century later. These translations, which varied greatly in style and represented multiple confessional approaches, were made by different institutions and religious groups, including International Bible Society (Biblica), which published ‘New Russian Translation’ in 2006, or Jehovah’s Witnesses, whose ‘New World Translation’ appeared in 2007 (and was banned as ‘extremist’ in Russia in 2017). Although the Synodal Bible was and still is the main version used by the Russian Orthodox Church, several groups within it were attempting to translate the Scripture into modern Russian from the 1980s. Some of those people later

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<sup>290</sup> For example: Olga Sedakova, “Sergei Averintsev, chtets,” in *Sergei Sergeevich Averintsev: Vospominaniia. Razmyshleniia. Posviashcheniia* (Sviato-Filaretovskii pravoslavno-khristianskii institut, 2020), 230; “V khristianstve ia oshchushchaiu ispug ot prostora,” Sviato-Filaretovskii institut, February 20, 2023, <https://sfi.ru/sfi-today/news/v-khristianstve-ia-oshchushchaiu-ispug-ot-prostora.html>. Also in media: Iuliia Zaitseva, “Chtets Sergii Averintsev,” Blagovest-info, June 20, 2009, <https://www.blagovest-info.ru/index.php?ss=2&s=4&id=28106>.

<sup>291</sup> Sviato-Filaretovskii Inst., “Sergei Sergeevich Averintsev.”

<sup>292</sup> Sergei Averintsev, *Perevody: Evangeliiia. Kniga Iova. Psalmy* (Dukh i Litera, 2004).

became members of the Interconfessional Russian Bible Society (RBS) that carried on with this work from 1995 to 2011, when the ‘Modern Russian Translation’ was finally published, offering the readers a more legible text of the fundamental source of the Christian faith.<sup>293</sup>

Sergei Averintsev’s Bible translations, however, stand apart from this large collective project, occupying a somewhat intermediate position. On the one hand, drawing on modern philological knowledge, he sought to correct the ambiguities and inaccuracies of the Synodal translation. On the other hand, he resolutely refused to use ‘excessively modern’ words, ‘associated with the issues of the day,’<sup>294</sup> and therefore the language of his translation remains largely archaic. Averintsev himself described his position as a ‘middle way,’ consistently avoiding the extremes of sacralisation and modernisation of language alike.<sup>295</sup>

Let us compare, for example, the translations of the Lord’s Prayer (Matthew 6:9–13):

| Synodal Bible                                                             | Averintsev’s translation                      | RBS Translation                           |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------|
| 9. Моліться же так: «Отче наш, сущий на небесах! да святится имя Твое;    | 9 Поэтому вы молитесь так: Отец наш Небесный! | 9 А вы молитесь так: Отец наш на Небесах! |
| 10. да приидет Царствие Твое; да будет воля Твоя и на земле, как на небе; | да святится Имя Твое,                         | Да прославится имя Твое,                  |
| 11. хлеб наш насущный дай нам на сей день;                                | 10 да приидет Царствие Твое,                  | 10 да придет Царство Твое,                |
| 12. и прости нам долги наши, как и мы прощаем должникам нашим;            | да будет воля Твоя                            | да исполнится воля Твоя                   |
|                                                                           | и на земле, как на небе;                      | на земле,                                 |
|                                                                           | 11 хлеб наш насущный                          | как на Небе.                              |
|                                                                           | подай нам сегодня,                            | 11 Хлеб наш насущный                      |
|                                                                           | 12 и прости нам долги наши,                   | дай нам сегодня.                          |
|                                                                           |                                               | 12 И прости нам долги наши,               |

<sup>293</sup> “Predislovie ko vtoromu izdaniuu,” Rossiiskoe Bibleiskoe Obshchestvo, 2014, <https://biblia.ru/AboutBible/ContemporaryRussian/predislovie-ko-vtoromu-izdaniyu.html>.

<sup>294</sup> Averintsev, *Perevody: Evangeliiia. Kniga Iova. Psalm*, 309.

<sup>295</sup> Ibid, 306.

|                                                                                                                              |                                                                                                                    |                                                                                                       |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 13. и не введи нас в<br>искушение, но избавь нас<br>от лукавого. Ибо Твое есть<br>Царство и сила и слава<br>во веки. Аминь». | как и мы простили<br>должникам нашим,<br>13 и не допусти нам впасть<br>во искушение,<br>но избавь нас от Лукавого. | как и мы прощаем<br>должникам нашим.<br>13 Не подвергай нас<br>испытанию,<br>но защити нас от Злодея. |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|

Even this limited comparison shows how little Averintsev deviated from the Synodal Bible. He preserved archaic forms of words (*priidet*, *vpast' vo iskusheniie*) and made only minor, theologically correct edits (in the phrase *ne dopusti nam vpast'*, he changed the subject of the action from God to man), or completely insignificant corrections motivated solely by philological meticulousness — not *proshchaem* (we forgive, present tense) but *prostili* (we forgave, past tense) because that is how it appears in earlier manuscripts.<sup>296</sup> This translation strategy, however, proved too much of a compromise: Averintsev's version remains stylistically close to the Synodal one and does not increase the accessibility and comprehensibility of the text for the modern reader; therefore, it has not been particularly popular.

In addition, some of Averintsev's translation choices were questionable, to say the least. One curious example is his translation of the Greek word 'hetairos,' i.e. 'friend' or 'mate,' as *liubeznyi* (akin to 'my good man' in English), as pointed out by Valentina Kuznetsova, the author of a modernised translation of the New Testament:

He is, in fact, an archaist. I first appreciated the Synodal translation of the psalms when I read his translation. I understand almost everything in the Synodal translation, but not in Averintsev's. Quite recently, by the way, I opened one of his translations of the Gospels to look something up and was horrified: '*On ne dosvolial besam glagolat*' (He did not allow the demons to speak). Is this a modern translation into modern Russian? Or Judas approaches Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, kisses Jesus, and Jesus says, '*Tak vot zachem ty prishel, liubeznyi?*' (So that's why you came, my good

<sup>296</sup>

Ibid, 203.

man?) In modern Russian, this word is used only ironically. In fact, it was used to address servants. In Chekhov: '*Liubeznyi, ot tebia kuritsej pakhnet*' (My good man, you smell of poultry).<sup>297</sup>

Indeed, words such as *liubeznyi* or phrases like '*skazhite, chto deskat', eto ucheniki Ego*' (Say that, supposedly, these were His disciples) (Matthew 28:13), instead of the simple *skazhite chto* ('say that' or 'say ye') in other translations, sound to a native Russian speaker as a strange glitch in the biblical text. Averintsev's translation, thus, turned out to be an uncertain compromise between preserving the archaism of the Synodal text and correcting it based on careful philological analysis, which, however, occasionally led to obvious inconsistencies in style.

This attempt at compromise also defined another important line of his work as a Christian intellectual — his religious essays. Averintsev not only offered a cultural and political critique of modernity but also sought to contribute to the life of the Russian Orthodox Church in the 1990s. His article 'On the Other Side of "traditionalism" and "liberalism"' [*Po tu storonu 'traditsionalizma' i 'liberalizma,'* 1996] saw him join the debate between 'traditionalists' and 'liberals' within the Church, i.e., between those who tended to portray God as a 'supervisor and punisher' and to subject humanity to 'the letter of ancient canons,' and those who presented God as a 'kind uncle' who in no way restricted human permissiveness.<sup>298</sup> He himself once again adopted a middle stance, insisting that faith should not be an ideology, neither 'right' nor 'left' — and, as an example of such faith, he pointed to Metropolitan Anthony of Sourozh, who was both accepting and exacting with his parishioners. Anthony of Sourozh (1914–2003) was an Orthodox bishop who, for many years, headed the Diocese of Sourozh in Great Britain and was well known among the late Soviet Orthodox intelligentsia

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<sup>297</sup> Valentina Kuznetsova, "O iumore v Biblii i khristianstve," *Moi goda*, August 11, 2015, <https://moi-goda.ru/nasha-pochta-nashi-spori/valentina-kuznetsova-o-iumore-v-biblii-i-christianstve>.

<sup>298</sup> Sergei Averintsev, "Po tu storonu «traditsionalizma» i «liberalizma»," *Kontinent*, no. 1 (1996), <https://ruins.magazines.gorky.media/continent/2011/149/po-tu-storonu-tradiczionalizma-i-liberalizma.html>.

as an outstanding missionary.<sup>299</sup> Apparently, for Averintsev, he was particularly important as a model of a modern Church intellectual, combining Orthodox spirituality with Western rationality.

In addition, like Metropolitan Anthony, Averintsev participated in ecumenical dialogue between different Christian denominations, which, as he explained in his extensive encyclopaedic entry 'Christianity in the Twentieth Century' [*Khristianstvo v XX veke*, 1995], was conditioned by:

the situation in which Christianity as a faith is reintroducing itself to the non-Christian world; people who become Christian through personal choice are less and less likely to inherit the confessional culture of their ancestors, and the mutual grievances between confessions dating back centuries are becoming increasingly irrelevant to them.<sup>300</sup>

In other words, Averintsev argued that while confessional boundaries had been decisive in the past, in the twentieth century, Christians of different denominations began to unite to resist first totalitarianism and then secularism. In this regard, he directly supported the position of the Catholic Church and of Pope John Paul II personally, who were taking 'important steps towards modernity,' seeking dialogue with the Orthodox and Protestants while not losing their own identity and defending core 'Christian principles' (among which Averintsev listed, for example, the prohibition of abortion and same-sex marriage).<sup>301</sup> The problem was that even such an 'ecumenical dialogue' was considered heresy by the ultra-conservative wing of the Russian Orthodox Church. In 1997, responding to the ban on the ministry of the well-known iconographer Archimandrite Zinon after a joint service and communion with Catholics, Averintsev wrote an article entitled 'An Attempt to Speak Calmly About the Disturbing' [*Popytka govorit' spokoino o trevozhashchem*]. For him, the 'disturbing'

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<sup>299</sup> Avril Pyman, *Metropolitan Anthony of Sourozh: A Life* (The Lutterworth Press, 2016).

<sup>300</sup> Sergei Averintsev, "Khristianstvo v XX veke," in *Sofiia-Logos. Slovar'* (Dukh i litera, 2006), 655.

<sup>301</sup> Ibid, 674–675.

thing was the prohibition of ministry because of ecumenical communion, while the ‘attempt to speak calmly’ meant pointing to the theological complexity of the matter (the ancient canons that prohibited communion with heretics had not been abolished, but they were adopted before the Great Schism) and, most importantly, to the existence of a common enemy in the form of ‘all-encompassing’ secularism.<sup>302</sup>

After Averintsev’s death, his fame, while gradually fading in the academic world, has been maintained by the institutions of the Russian Orthodox Church: primarily, those that he was actively involved with, the Preobrazhenskoe Brotherhood and the St Philaret Institute. They participate in the organisation of memorial evenings and scholarly conferences (the most prominent of which is the ‘Averintsev Readings’<sup>303</sup>). Georgii Kochetkov, an Orthodox priest who plays a leading role in both, and in whose church Averintsev was initially a parishioner and later delivered sermons, even spoke of Averintsev’s sanctity on television:

Our remarkable theologian Father Vitalii Borovoi [...] called Sergei Sergeevich a saint after his death. This is no coincidence; it is not just a euphemism or a metaphor. Sergei Sergeyevich had exceptional qualities of a person who is not just faithful, or knowledgeable, or a genius [...] he had some prophetic traits and [made] some amazing apologetic discoveries – he knew how to talk to modern people about faith, the Church and Christianity.<sup>304</sup>

Another priest who knew Averintsev well, Valentin Asmus, published his recollections in *Zhurnal Moskovskoi Patriarkhii* [The Journal of the Moscow Patriarchate], adapting Averintsev’s biography to this official outlet of the Russian Orthodox Church. He described

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<sup>302</sup> Sergei Averintsev, “Popytka govorit’ spokoino o trevozhashchem,” *Pravoslavnaia obshchina*, no. 37 (1997), <https://pravoslavnaya-obshina.ru/1997/no37/article/sergei-averincevpopytka-govorit-spokoino-o-trevozhashch/>.

<sup>303</sup> The conferences took place in various cities: Tver, Moscow, and St. Petersburg. In 2023, the tenth conference was held; see its program on the website of the St Philaret Institute: “X Averintsevskie chteniia,” Sviato-Filaretovskii institut, February 2023, <https://sfi.ru/announcements/kh-averintsevskie-chteniia.html>.

<sup>304</sup> Georgii Kochetkov, “Kak akademik Sergei Averintsev stal tserkovnym propovednikom,” Sviato-Filaretovskii institut, February 21, 2024, <https://sfi.ru/sfi-today/interview/otets-georgii-kochetkov-o-sergee-averintseve.html>.

Averintsev's lectures and articles as 'apologetic preaching of Christianity,' discussing in detail his translations of the Gospels, religious poetry, and moral criticism of contemporary society, as well as defending him from suspicions of ecumenism.<sup>305</sup>

At the time of writing, the publication of Averintsev's collected works has got underway at the publishing house of Saint Tikhon's Orthodox University. The first volume, which brings together his studies on ancient history and literature, came out at the very end of 2024. The editor Egor Agafonov states quite openly that the aim of this publishing project is not merely to return Averintsev's texts into academic discussions, but to 'cultivate the next generation' of Christian-minded intellectuals.<sup>306</sup> The Church, therefore, seeks to reignite his fading intellectual cult for its own ends. Whether it will succeed, and to what extent, remains to be seen. For now, it seems likely that such an instrumentalisation, especially in times of extreme social and political polarisation, would result in a simplification and ideological appropriation of his highly complex and controversial intellectual legacy. However, this outcome was partly conditioned by Averintsev himself, for he was the first to transfer the symbolic capital accumulated during his academic career into the sphere of political and religious struggle in the early post-Soviet period.

Averintsev's fame as an intellectual star was created by his scholarly work, ranging from Plutarch to Mandel'shtam, his religious entries in the *Philosophical Encyclopaedia*, and, of course, his public lectures, which attracted the late Soviet educated audience. In the late 1980s, he used this fame to become a public intellectual, openly advocating for Christian values as the foundation of culture and politics. As a Christian intellectual, Averintsev sought to occupy a middle ground between two extremes in various issues: matters of Bible translation into Russian; the transformation of religious norms in the modern world;

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<sup>305</sup> Asmus, "Sergei Sergeevich Averintsev: filolog, filosof, bogoslov," 80–81.

<sup>306</sup> *Sergei Averintsev: diskussii o nasledii vydaiushchegosia filologa, kul'turologa i perevodchika*, (Kul'turnyi tsentr Pokrovskie vorota, 2025), [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2XmSdYb\\_b44](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2XmSdYb_b44).

interconfessional dialogue; and even such a controversial issue as the cooperation of Russian Orthodox Church hierarchs with the KGB.<sup>307</sup>

Today, more than twenty years after his death, it seems that the extreme right-wing and nationalist tendencies that he feared, have prevailed in the Russian Orthodox Church. Moreover, the Church continues to benefit from the results of his intellectual work and his symbolic capital, using his critique of liberal ‘permissiveness.’ In contemporary Russia, the space for rational and nuanced public discussions, for which he always advocated, is rapidly shrinking, while the moral panics, which he also helped fuel, are raging. Such is the complex legacy of the Soviet intelligentsia that needs to be reconsidered.

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<sup>307</sup> Sergei Averintsev, “My i nashi ierarkhi vchera i segodnia,” in *Sofiia-Logos. Slovar’* (Dukh i litera, 2006), 756.

## CONCLUSION. THE PRIESTS OF CULTURE

This dissertation began with fervent comments under a video recording of an interview with Sergei Averintsev about Aleksei Losev. Thereafter, we have constantly encountered various forms of reverence and admiration for these ‘geniuses,’ which at times approached quasi-religious forms of veneration. The two intellectuals’ followers and admirers presented them not merely as scholars, but as Teachers, and established an inseparable link between their intellectual work and their personalities. The study of such intellectual cults similarly requires the researcher to establish links, analysing three interconnected processes: (1) theoretical, that is, the production of knowledge; (2) symbolic, that is, the production of a cult image; and (3) social, that is, the production of social networks and groups.

As I have demonstrated, my protagonists’ social and intellectual strategies were homologous, or structurally similar. In Losev’s case, the eclectic structure of his theory, with its marriage of Marxism and Russian religious philosophy, dialectics and physiognomy, was homologous to the eclectic structure of his *kruzhok*, which brought together very different intellectual and political groups. Similarly, the axis of this theory — the ‘integral principle’ of culture — corresponded to the central and integrative role of Losev’s personality within the *kruzhok*. In Averintsev’s case, his intellectual approach, situated at the disciplinary intersection of philology, philosophy, and theology and focused on cultural ‘crossroads,’ collisions, and syntheses of cultures, was homologous with his strategy of self-positioning as a mediator, occupying a position between Soviet and European culture, and, from the late 1980s onwards, a position as a public intellectual between liberal and nationalist political discourses, as well as between conservative and ecumenist movements within the Russian Orthodox Church.

As we have seen, Losev and Averintsev were similar in many respects. They both engaged in ambitious intellectual work that transcended disciplinary boundaries; both were guides to other cultural worlds, who opened access to the ‘treasures’ of pre-revolutionary Russian or

European cultures for their Soviet listeners and readers; both were devout Christians who sought to combine their intellectual pursuits and religious beliefs; and, finally, both belonged to the same intelligentsia milieu. However, upon closer examination, fundamental differences emerge from behind these similarities, ultimately helping to explain the divergent fates of their intellectual cults.

To begin with, the personal relationship between Losev and Averintsev was neither simple nor unproblematic. In 1962, the young Sergei Averintsev, a talented postgraduate student at the Department of Classical Philology at Moscow State University, which Aza Takho-Godi had just become Head of, visited Aleksei Losev for the first time. Takho-Godi emphasised in her memoirs how similar their intellectual interests and cultural preferences were:

Sergei loved music, revered Wagner and the Russian symbolists, and was drawn to the completely forbidden realm of Byzantine religious poetry and theology. He had an excellent knowledge of ancient and modern languages, and he was interested precisely in what the young Losev had been fascinated with. This is how Losev became close with Sergei, who did not come alone but with his friend, a Germanist and expert on Heidegger and music, Sasha Mikhailov. Both of them became visitors to Losev's study, where they sat at an oval table and discussed topics that were most relevant to them, while I served them tea and listened to their conversations about the differences between Catholicism and Orthodoxy.<sup>1</sup>

In the 1960s, Averintsev's studies was inspired by Losev's philosophy — his 'Byzantine aesthetics', for example, methodologically followed Losev's 'ancient aesthetics'.<sup>2</sup>

However, towards the end of the decade, when Averintsev became very popular, Losev began to feel jealous of his student's success. Vladimir Bibikhin's notes allow us to trace the development of this sentiment. In June 1970, Losev remarked: 'I don't know what he says at

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<sup>1</sup> Aza Takho-Godi, *Losev*, 327–328.

<sup>2</sup> Sergei Averintsev, *Poetika rannevizantiiskoi literatury*, 38–41.

the university. Is he by any chance retelling my lectures?’ In September 1971, he criticised Averintsev’s translations from Ancient Greek (‘so much ad-libbing that it borders on errors’). In January 1973, he stated that, although his and Averintsev’s theories were close in essence, ‘he is a Chaliapin, and I am a teacher of Greek.’ Finally, in May 1975, Losev criticised Averintsev at length, including directly accusing him of plagiarism: ‘Averintsev carelessly takes from me and does not cite me. It is theft.’<sup>3</sup> It would appear that Bibikhin was not the only one who had such conversations with Losev. For example, Iurii Kashkarov, an editor at the publishing house *Iskusstvo*, who worked on the first volumes of *The History of Ancient Aesthetics* and was at one point a member of Losev’s circle, before he left for America, in a highly laudatory article about Losev in the émigré magazine *The New Review*, described Averintsev as ‘a famulus who secretly plagiarises his teacher.’<sup>4</sup> Moreover, Losev found another curious (and public) way to assert his intellectual superiority. In the late 1970s, he wrote a short entry on Averintsev for the *Short Literary Encyclopaedia*, in which he argued that Averintsev’s view of the humanities as a form of understanding that cannot be reduced either to a subjective feeling or a rationalistic calculation was formed ‘under the influence of A. Losev, M. Bakhtin, and D. Likhachev’ (notably putting himself in first place).<sup>5</sup>

Averintsev, in turn, while remaining consistently respectful towards Losev, nevertheless sought to emphasise his intellectual independence. Even the obituary in which Averintsev wrote that Losev’s death felt ‘as if we looked out of the window in the morning and saw that the mountain, which for generations had sealed off the horizon, had disappeared overnight’<sup>6</sup> was read by some people close to both men as an ambiguous statement. Bibikhin recorded his reaction to this obituary in 1988: ‘Losev was a phenomenon of nature, a mountain that always stood before our eyes and now suddenly was gone. Subconsciously: blocking the

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<sup>3</sup> Vladimir Bibikhin, *Aleksei Fedorovich Losev. Sergei Sergeevich Averintsev*, 15, 99, 174, 235–240.

<sup>4</sup> D. Skalon, “A.F. Losev,” *Novyi Zhurnal* (New York), no. 150 (1983): 283. See also: Ivan Ivaniushkin, “A. F. Losev i S. S. Averintsev: peresechenie biografii,” in *Prinoshenie: Aze Alibekovne Takho-Godi ot blagodarnykh uchenikov i kolleg k 100-letiiu so dnia rozhdeniia: Fuga temporum.*, ed. Elena Takho-Godi (Aleteiia, 2023), 352.

<sup>5</sup> Aleksei Losev, “Averintsev,” in *Kratkaia literaturnaia entsiklopediia*, vol. 9 (1978), 26.

<sup>6</sup> Averintsev, “Pamiati uchitelia,” 3.

view and freedom of movement.<sup>7</sup> And thirty-five years later, Gasan Gusejnov reflected on this interpretation in our interview, agreeing that Averintsev's statement is ambiguous: Losev's authority could be overwhelming, 'as if this mountain completely blocked one's view of the world.'<sup>8</sup> In 1993, Averintsev allowed himself to 'approach the phenomenon of Losev' and offered a critical analysis of his 'totalitarian' style of thinking, which forcibly subordinated diverse cultural phenomena to a single principle<sup>9</sup> (just as Losev's authority subordinated his students and followers).

Averintsev did not sever his ties with Losev's circle, but from the 1970s onwards he distanced himself from it to emerge from the shadow of Losev's 'mountain.' His intellectual strategy became far more individualistic — that of an intellectual star ('Chaliapin,' as Losev put it), relying on public acknowledgement rather than on a *kruzhok*. Moreover, in an interview from the late 1980s, he explicitly contrasted the practices of a *kruzhok* to the position of an intellectual who thought responsibly and engaged in polemics respectfully:

I think that one of the pressing duties of intelligentsia is to resist the spreading evil of *kruzhki* mentality, which threatens to turn all activity in the sphere of culture into a kind of game played for one's own team, and programmes and theses, clichés and lists of names to be praised or reviled — into conventional signs of team membership, like the colour of a shirt.<sup>10</sup>

Later, in a 2001 interview, he stated that he 'could never stand the atmosphere of *kruzhki*.'<sup>11</sup> I believe this open rejection of circle structures lay at the core of his intellectual strategy and expressed his desire not to limit himself to any small group, but to address large audiences.

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<sup>7</sup> Bibikhin, *Aleksei Fedorovich Losev. Sergei Sergeevich Averintsev*, 297.

<sup>8</sup> Gasan Gusejnov, philologist, Losev's secretary and Averintsev's colleague; interview date: 17.12.2023.

<sup>9</sup> Sergei Averintsev, "«Mirovozzrencheskii stil'»: podstupy k iavleniiu Loseva," in *Sofiia-Logos. Slovar'* (Dukh i Litera, 2006), 724–726.

<sup>10</sup> Sergei Averintsev, *Popytki ob"iasnit'sia. Besedy o kul'ture* (Pravda, 1988), 38.

<sup>11</sup> *Interv'iu o. Ioanna Privalova u Sergeia Sergeevicha Averintseva*, 2001, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dB5437oeAH8>.

This attitude to the *kruzhok* constitutes the key difference between the two scholars. Losev and Aza Takho-Godi created a *kruzhok* — a group of people actively involved in collective work that facilitated the writing, editing, and publishing of Losev's books — whereas Averintsev ultimately chose the path of a public intellectual who addressed a large, mostly anonymous audience. He achieved impressive success even within the limited and controlled public sphere of the 1960s–80s, and after its transformation in the late 1980s, he became a public intellectual in the full sense of the word.

This difference also shaped the fate of their intellectual cults and post-Soviet legacies. After Losev's death, members of his *kruzhok*, led by Takho-Godi, succeeded in expanding his cult. As a result of their extensive research, commentary, publishing, and memorial work, Losev's reputation as 'the last philosopher of the Silver Age' and 'the scholar-monk in the world' was solidified within the Russian intellectual canon. They created institutions such as the 'Losev House' library and the 'Losev Readings' conferences, which attracted not only established scholars but also high school and university students, thereby exposing them to Losev's canonised image. After Averintsev's death, nothing akin to this happened: his works were rarely republished or commented on, and although his friends and admirers wrote memoirs and a few studies, they were not united into a community and did not create a unified narrative or 'myth' about Averintsev. Averintsev remains today a significant intellectual figure of the *past*, seemingly no longer interesting, since there are no successors who would claim his intellectual legacy and highlight the relevance of his approach or his concepts in the current situation (Olga Sedakova is, perhaps, the only notable exception). Thus, in the long run, Losev's focus on a relatively small group of students, followers and friends proved more successful than Averintsev's focus on the recognition by the general public and influence within the Russian humanities and securing his status as a classic in the national intellectual canon.

Women played a central role in the canonisation of intellectual cult figures. Aza Takho-Godi devoted decades to Losev's philosophy, using her academic position and broad network to promote his ideas. There were also many women among Losev's students and secretaries.

At collective events, such as moving to the dacha or celebrating birthdays, the gendered division of labour was fairly conventional (men carried furniture, women prepared food, and so on), but in intellectual work women participated on equal terms with men. The difference became more apparent after Losev's death: his male students — Vladimir Bibikhin, Gasan Gusejnov, and Igor' Makhan'kov — sought, in different ways, to use his legacy to pursue their own ambitions, whereas female students, such as Nadezhda Malinauskene (Sadykova) and Liudmila Gogotishvili, remained 'faithful' disciples,<sup>12</sup> working extensively on commenting on and interpreting Losev's ideas. Natalia Averintseva performed a more traditional role of a wife who gave up her own career to do chores and take care of her husband. And Olga Sedakova, who to some extent acted as a promoter of Averintsev's legacy, nevertheless differed from Losev's female students as she was not embedded in the *kruzhok* structure and did not reproduce or elaborate a narrative developed within it. I suggest that the gendered aspects of (post-)Soviet intellectual cults could be one of the most promising directions for further research (particularly given that conservative views on gender and sexuality, quite close to those expressed by Averintsev, have become an 'ideological proxy' for Putin's regime<sup>13</sup>).

It is crucial to note that Losev's and Averintsev's strategies were at the same time social and intellectual. For example, the two men's tactics of engaging with Marxism, which I analyse in detail above, differed fundamentally not only because Losev, having survived the Gulag, was very cautious, while Averintsev began his career in more 'vegetarian' times and could rely on the support of influential academic patrons. The difference also arose from the fact that Losev relied on a personalist hermeneutics and wrote with a particular readership in mind, if not personally acquainted with him, then at least aware of who he was, and therefore able to see what was hidden behind his deliberate use of ideological formulae. At the same time, forced to use Marxism, Losev tried to do it well, developing Marxist concepts and

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<sup>12</sup> Takho-Godi, *Losev*, 382.

<sup>13</sup> Julia A. Cassiday, *Russian Style: Performing Gender, Power, and Putinism*. (The University of Wisconsin Press, 2023), 5.

transforming his argument, using materialistic dialectics; he was also proud of how well he did it.<sup>14</sup> Averintsev, on the contrary, made deliberate disregard for Marxism part of his self-presentation, delighting his much more numerous (though still limited) listeners with carefully calculated moves that broke with the Soviet cultural order. As I demonstrate, he was able to transcend the demands of censorship, falling back on the support of editors and influential patrons; however, unlike Losev, his personal relations did not develop into a group network.

Likewise, their religious positions also diverged. Both were devout Christians, deeply interested in religious philosophy and theology, but they expressed this interest in different ways. Losev, whom his followers called a monk, did not participate in church life, apparently maintaining an anti-Sergian attitude, that is, rejecting the official Orthodox Church, because it had submitted to Soviet power.<sup>15</sup> Not only did he not attend services, confess, or take communion, but even with members of his *kruzhok*, he would discuss theological issues solely theoretically, never in the context of his personal religiosity. For example, Vladimir Zhdanov, who was Losev's assistant for many years, told me in an interview that he learned that Losev used to pray not from him but from Mina Takho-Godi, Aza's sister.<sup>16</sup> Ultimately, Aza Takho-Godi herself claimed that she only learnt that Losev was a monk only after his death, having lived with him for forty-four years.<sup>17</sup> By the end of his life, Losev's private and even secret religiosity coexisted with the growing cult around him, which manifested in the form of quasi-religious veneration and, in some cases, declaration of his sainthood.<sup>18</sup> Averintsev, on the contrary, gained recognition by discussing religious topics publicly, and, as Aleksandr Dobrokhotoev told me, was ready to talk about his religious experience after his

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<sup>14</sup> 'I have thought through the whole of antiquity in sociological and historical terms. [...] I can boast that I alone have worked through this whole colossus in the Marxist spirit.' Bibikhin, *Aleksei Fedorovich Losev. Sergei Sergeevich Averintsev*, 136.

<sup>15</sup> In 1927, metropolitan Sergii declared Church's loyalty to the Soviet state. See: Takho-Godi, *Losev*, 115–128.

<sup>16</sup> Vladimir Zhdanov, slavist, Losev's assistant, interview date: 08.03.2024.

<sup>17</sup> Takho-Godi, *Losev*, 443.

<sup>18</sup> Takho-Godi, *Losev*, 443; Galina Belova, *Pominaite uchitelei i nastavnikov vashikh*, 76, 92.

lectures in the corridor with students he hardly knew.<sup>19</sup> In the 1990s, he accepted the ecclesiastical rank of reader, gave sermons, and participated in the work of church institutions (albeit sometimes only nominally). He publicly manifested his faith as a Christian intellectual, and that is why the Church is now seeking to take advantage of the results of his intellectual work and his symbolic capital.

Finally, we can discern a similar distinction between Losev's and Averintsev's political positions. Losev criticised 'bourgeois individualism,' but this philosophical criticism never took on an overtly political form of a conservative anti-democratic stance. Moreover, he deliberately avoided expressing a definitive political position, maintaining a reserved and ironic tone in conversations with members of his *kruzhok*. Of course, his communicative tactic can be, at least in part, attributed to the cautiousness of a person who had experienced political repression; yet it also allowed Losev to unite representatives of both the liberal and conservative factions of the Soviet intelligentsia around him, leaving them enough room for interpretation to consider him their ally. Conversely, as soon as it became possible in the late 1980s to declare his position publicly, Averintsev immediately took an active part in political life. In a sense, his position was also ambiguous; however, this was not because he did not articulate it sufficiently, but because, as in many other instances, he sought to act as a mediator, occupying a middle ground between liberal and traditionalist forces. The complexity of his 'in-between' position was enhanced by the discrepancy between political divisions in Russia and in the West: in the 1990s, he enjoyed being 'in Moscow, a liberal, in the West, a fundamentalist.'<sup>20</sup> Thus, the strategies they chose — Losev being 'at the centre' and Averintsev 'in between' — determined the difference between their theoretical and political positions, as well as the fate of their intellectual legacy in post-Soviet Russia.

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<sup>19</sup> Aleksandr Dobrokhoto, philosopher close to Losev's *kruzhok* and Averintsev's colleague at MSU; interview date: 17.11.2024.

<sup>20</sup> Bibikhin, Aleksei Fedorovich Losev. Sergei Sergeevich Averintsev, 405. Bibikhin made this entry shortly after Sergei Averintsev, Olga Sedakova, Sergei Khoruzhii, and Konstantin Sigov met with Pope John Paul II on June 20<sup>th</sup>, 1995. It is unclear which of them recounted this conversation to Bibikhin.

The late Soviet academic intelligentsia developed a plethora of conceptualisations of culture that were alternative to official Marxism. However, behind different definitions there almost always lied a shared understanding of culture as a sphere of high values. As Svetlana Boym aptly argues, ‘in Russia culture has been mostly defined in the singular and with a capital “C”; it has become a kind of civic religion that delimits an imagined community of spiritual refinement, a literary aristocracy of sorts.’<sup>21</sup> This means that the significance of cultural research extended far beyond academic work, as cultural knowledge was considered by intellectuals and their audiences to be a ‘treasure,’ and those who preserved and studied it became a kind of priests, helping others to access the sacred and opening access to ‘other worlds’ for them. For the Soviet intelligentsia, European culture was the ‘other world’ par excellence, particularly those historical periods that were seen as possessing universal cultural value, such as Antiquity and Renaissance.<sup>22</sup> Losev and Averintsev were regarded by their followers and admirers not only as scholars, but as embodiments of ‘true’ culture. Cults formed around some of these quasi-priests;<sup>23</sup> not only their intellectual work, but also (and sometimes primarily) their personality, their beliefs, tastes, and even physical characteristics became objects of admiration and worship. The fate of these cults varied: in Losev’s case, it was based on the social infrastructure of his *kruzhok*, so that after his death the cult image was preserved within the Russian philosophical canon; Averintsev, by contrast, staked his career on the role of a public intellectual, and his cult has gradually declined (although, as the efforts of church intellectuals demonstrate, his symbolic capital is still valuable enough to be appropriated). The theoretical, symbolic, and social structures developed in the late Soviet period still

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<sup>21</sup> Svetlana Boym, *Common Places: Mythologies of Everyday Life in Russia* (Harvard University Press, 1994), 103.

<sup>22</sup> Another direction for future research, developing the subjects of this thesis, could be the construction of ‘world’ or ‘European’ culture in the late Soviet period. Among the works on which such research might draw are: Anne E. Gorsuch and Diane Koenker, eds., *The Socialist Sixties: Crossing Borders in the Second World* (Indiana University Press, 2013); Gilburd, *To See Paris and Die*; Tihanov et al., *World Literature in the Soviet Union*.

<sup>23</sup> I suggest that the religious component of their intellectual work was an important, but not decisive, factor in the cult-building. Other intellectual cults (those of Merab Mamardashvili, Georgii Shchedrovitskii and Iurii Lotman) lacked this component, yet were constructed with similar symbolic ‘bricks.’

largely shape Russian intellectual life. They are reproduced in institutionalised forms of textbooks and university courses, as well as in concepts and methodological approaches that over time turn into ‘common sense.’ Historical research into these structures is a necessary, though not sufficient, condition for changing the Russian intellectual landscape. This dissertation is intended as one contribution to this work.

## APPENDIX. THE LIST OF INFORMANTS

1. Gasan Gusejnov, philologist, Losev's secretary and Averintsev's colleague; interview dates: 17.12.2023 (Losev), 25 and 27.10.2024 (Averintsev).
2. Marina Dmitrieva, art historian; interview date: 30.12.2023 (Losev).
3. Nikolai Shaburov, historian, Losev's secretary and listener of Averintsev's lectures; interview dates: 09.01.2024 (Losev), 17.11.2024 (Averintsev).
4. Anonymous, philologist, member of Losev's *kruzhok*; interview date: 25.01.2024 (Losev).
5. Igor' Makhan'kov, translator, Losev's secretary, interview date: 04.02.2024 (Losev).
6. Aleksandr Dobrokhoto, philosopher close to Losev's *kruzhok* and Averintsev's colleague at MSU; interview dates: 21.02.2024 (Losev), 17.11.2024 (Averintsev).
7. Viktor Troitskii, Losev scholar, member of Losev's *kruzhok*; interview date: 01.03.2024 (Losev).
8. Vladimir Zhdanov, slavist, Losev's assistant, interview date: 08.03.2024 (Losev).
9. Anonymous, Losev's colleague at MSPI, interview date: 09.03.2024 (Losev).
10. Vera Tolz, historian, Dmitrii Likhachev's granddaughter, interview date: 05.11.2024 (Averintsev).
11. Olga Sedakova, poet and scholar, Averintsev's friend and colleague, interview date: 09.11.2024 (Averintsev).
12. Fedor Poljakov, slavist, Averintsev's colleague, interview date: 16.11.2024 (Averintsev).
13. Alexey Muravyev, historian, Averintsev's doctoral student, interview date: 05.12.2024 (Averintsev).
14. Iurii Popov, philosopher, Averintsev's friend and editor, interview date: 07.12.2024 (Averintsev).

15. Tatiana Borodai, philosopher, Averintsev's colleague at MSU, interview date: 10.12.2024 (Averintsev).

16. Pavel Polian, Mandel'shtam scholar, interview date: 14.12.2024 (Averintsev).

17. Nina Braginskaia, historian and philologist, Averintsev's colleague, interview date: 28.12.2024 (Averintsev).

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