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Culture as *paideia*.
Sergei Averintsev and Olga Sedakova:
Mapping Out a Path for Contemporary
Christian Humanism

This paper aims to present from a new perspective the figures of the philologist Sergei Averintsev and of his pupil, the poet Olga Sedakova, i. e. seeing them as “public intellectuals”. Bearing in mind that this categorisation may seem paradoxical when applied to these Russian intellectuals who undertook a significant part of their work in the “alternative” culture of the post-Soviet era, the first part of this paper provides a reconstruction of their intellectual biographies which aims to justify the main thesis by offering a view on elements of the public attitude that have characterised their activity. The core of their intellectual engagement lies in their interpretation of the issue of culture as *paideia*, i. e. as a living word that needs to be transmitted not only in the academic sphere but in the public domain as well. Re-establishing the broken ties with the sources of culture (both Christian and secular) — an approach that recalls that employed by the humanists of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries — represents for Averintsev and Sedakova the very task of culture, i.e. offering to human beings the richness of tradition through new words, giving them the possibility to rediscover their value and their openness to the Otherness and the transcendence. The selection of the sources that are provided in the paper focuses almost entirely upon discourses, homilies or conference papers delivered in non-academic contexts which are still highly neglected in the literature devoted to them.

KEYWORDS: Sergei Averintsev, Olga Sedakova, Russian public intellectuals, Christian Humanism, culture, *paideia*, tradition.

A word is dead
When it is said,
Some say.

I say it just
Begins to live
that day.

Emily Dickinson

Sergei Averintsev and Olga Sedakova as “public intellectuals”¹

Intellectual work may involve a commitment that goes beyond the limits of specialist lexicon and that flows, almost necessarily, into the public sphere. In this respect, the late XIX Century is emblematic: it suffices to mention the Dreyfus Affair, considering the role played by Émile Zola within Europe, and the articulation of the intelligentsia, in its various forms, in the Russian Empire. If, however, we attempt to go further on wards and take into account late Soviet Russia, it seems fair to question the presence of intellectuals who were in a position to play a role in the public domain.

The first aim of this paper is to show that, namely during this period, some intellectuals began to take on a public role — one that they would continue to maintain in the post-Soviet space. For this purpose, I will focus on two specific cases, the first concerning the philologist Sergei Averintsev (Moscow, 1937 — Vienna, 2001) and the second being that of the poet Olga Sedakova (Moscow 1949): besides the differences in their ages, education and area of expertise, these two figures — bonded by a long friendship — shared the same interpretation of cultural transmission as a crucial element for the constitution of a human being that is active and responsible in the social domain. As it is known², Sedakova was Averintsev’s pupil in the 1970s — 1980s, and she recalls:

1. A key point in developing the interpretation of S. Averintsev and O. Sedakova as “public intellectuals” was a conversation with Alexander Kyrlezhev that took place in Moscow in April 2018. I acknowledge him for introducing me to the concept of “Kulturträger”. I also thank Kristina Stoeckl for agreeing to discuss with me the idea that I present in this paper. With regard to literature: several volumes have been published in the last thirty years on the issue of “public intellectuals”. They mostly focus on Anglo-American or French examples and even when the Soviet Union is considered,

however briefly, the cases cited are the ones that had more resonance to Western audiences (i. e. B. Pasternak, A. Sakharov, A. Solzhenitsyn). See among others: R. A. Posner. “Public Intellectuals : A Study of Decline” [*Posner, 162*]; P. Hassner. “The Public Intellectual and the Experience of Totalitarianism” [*Hassner*].

2. The relevance Averintsev had in the constitution of her intellectual perspective has been described by Sedakova herself in several works. See, among others, “Apologija ratsional’nogo. S. S. Averintsev” [*Sedakova 2010b*]; “Dva otklika na konchinu Sergeia

Much of my work is dedicated to him — work in which I try to understand the innovation and originality of the cultural and hermeneutic method that he introduced [Sedakova 2014a, 206].

In the first part of this paper, I will try to make explicit what the public role³ of these authors involved, by providing a synthetic profile of their intellectual biographies.

With regard to Sergei Averintsev, it is imperative to address his “public role” since the late Soviet phase, due to the impressive (and unusual for the time) number of students attending his classes on Byzantine aesthetics at Moscow State University between 1969 and 1971⁴, the almost sixty entries he wrote for the fourth and fifth volumes of the *Filosofskaja entsiklopediia* [*Philosophical Encyclopedia* (v. 4, 1967; v. 5, 1970)] promoted by the Academy of Sciences of the USSR⁵, and the almost two hundred works⁶ (books, papers, reviews, translations) he published between 1960 and 1989. Averintsev’s translation activity was highly relevant. Starting in the 1960s until his death, he translated an impressive number of works covering a wide range of subjects (among them, ancient Latin and Greek poems and philosophical treatises, Medieval hymns, Psalms, modern German literature, French philosophy of the XX century). These were regularly published in volumes

Sergeevicha Avertitseva” [Sedakova 2010d]; “Reflections on Averintsev’s Method” [Sedakova 2006]. For a written account of their dialogue, see also a letter from Averintsev addressed to Sedakova that has been published in December 2017 on the “Gefter” » (URL: <http://gefter.ru/archive/23469> (accessed April 15, 2019)).

3. From the literature that I have accessed, the issue of Averintsev’s “public role” has been previously addressed by J. Sutton. In his “Introduction” to volume 58 (2) of “Studies in East European Thought” (Sutton J. “Studies in East European Thought : Introduction” [Sutton, 69]) devoted — in its first half — to the Russian philologist, he writes: «Is a concerted strengthening of the links between religion and contemporary culture one means by which religion can assume a constructive, even an educative role in the public sphere today?» Further elements that may lead towards an interpretation of Averintsev’s public role are given in A. Rocucci “Comprensione dell’alterità e incontro tra universi culturali nel pensiero di Sergej Sergeevič Averincev” in [Rocucci]. Regarding Sedakova, see K. Golubovich “The Poet and Darkness: The Politics of Artistic Form” [Golubovich] (Russian version: К. Голубович (2017). Поэт и тьма. Политика художественной формы //

Ольга Седакова: стихи, смыслы, прочтения : Сборник научных статей / Ред. С. Сандлер и др. М. : Новое литературное обозрение, с. 49–111); V. Faibysenko “Svoboda i tsentr. Neskol’ko slov o perepiske Vladimira Bibikhina i Ol’gi Sedakovoii” [Faibysenko]. With regard to both authors, see I. Kukulin “Stylized folklore as a Recollection of Europe : Olga Sedakova’s Old Songs and Alexander Pushkin’s Song of Western Slavs” [Kukulin]. (Russian version: Кукулин И. Стилизация фольклора как воспоминание о Европе : «Старые песни» и «Песни западных славян» // Ольга Седакова: стихи, смыслы, прочтения : Сборник научных статей / Ред. С. Сандлер и др. М. : Новое литературное обозрение, 2017. С. 295–320).

4. See O. Sedakova “Sergei Sergeevich Averintsev. K tvorcheskomu portretu uchenogo”: «The large university auditorium could only host a third of the people who went “to Averintsev’s” to be the first ones to listen to his translations and comments on mind-boggling passages from Aeropagiticus’ treatises, Damascene’s hymns and other great Byzantine theologians and mystics» [Sedakova 2005, 18].

5. On the relevance of encyclopedia entries in Averintsev’s works, see [Sigov].

6. See more: [Averintseva at al., 85–118].

and journals, and they demonstrate his commitment to bring World culture to the attention of Russian readers. Moreover, in 1989, when perestroika was at its zenith, Averintsev was elected as a delegate of the Academy of Sciences to the Congress of People's Deputies of the Soviet Union⁷, a position he held until 1991.

I will not reproduce here a list of university and scientific institutions where Averintsev became a member during the 1990s: such a list has already been published in 2005⁸. Rather, I shall instead focus on a specific activity of his that he began to carry out from 1990, i. e. his service as lector (*chtec*) and preacher (*propovednik*) in the parishes of the Transfiguration Brotherhood in Moscow⁹. Moreover, Averintsev made a substantial contribution to the activities of St. Philaret's Christian Orthodox Institute (SPHI) founded by this Brotherhood, participating in many conferences and becoming a member of the Board of Trustees. Recently, I had the opportunity to interview¹⁰ Father Georgi Kochetkov, founder of the Brotherhood and rector of the SFI, and talk with him about Averintsev's role in the life of his community. I hereby quote some of his reflections on Averintsev:

At some point in the nineties, I invited him to join the editorial board of the "Orthodox Community" journal. Before that he only helped us at the altar and delivered sermons. Everything that he said and did was not prompted at all: it was his autonomous decision. He used to reflect on the most difficult questions, and nothing was just about "giving his name". Sergei Sergeevich got to the root of the matters and he really helped us a lot. He wasn't simply an intelligent: there were lots of intelligenty; he was like an entire world, such people are very few [*Interview*].

Hence, Averintsev's "decision" was to make a contribution to the life of a concrete Christian community, "translating" the results of his academic work into words that would be understood by a non-academic audience¹¹. In order to give a synthetic definition, we could

7. This was not an easy experience for Averintsev, the difficulties he faced are partially covered in the article "K sovesti" ("To the Conscience"), published in the weekly magazine «Sovietskaia Gazeta» (June 15, 1989, p. 2). This text reproduces the speech that he was not able to deliver at the session of the Congress on the 9th June 1989.

8. See more: [*Averintseva et al.*, 4–5].

9. Averintsev's homilies have been included in: S. S. Averintsev "Dukhovnie slova : K 70-letiiu so dnia rozhdenia S. S. Averintseva" [*Averintsev 2007a*].

10. The interview took place in Moscow on the 29th July 2018. I am very grateful to Father Georgi Kochet-

kov for the permission to publicly reveal his answers to my questions. Oral testimonies are highly relevant in reconstructing the role of late and post-Soviet intellectuals such as S. Averintsev and O. Sedakova. Due to the paucity of the literary framework, interviews and testimonies act as sources for the reconstruction of an oral history that may provide the basis for further research.

11. For an overview of the contribution made by Averintsev to the life of the Transfiguration brotherhood see also Fr Georgi Kochetkov "Chudo lichnosti akademika Sergeia Averintseva" [*Kochetkov*].

mark Averintsev's intellectual style as being one that could be deemed as "mediation": during the late Soviet era, he endeavoured to re-establish the connection with the pre-revolutionary culture and the long Christian tradition, and in the 1990s — with new communication spaces opening up — he sought new ways to pass on that heritage.

Olga Sedakova — today renowned as one of the most respected Russian poets — could not have, in the Soviet system, a public presence comparable to that held by Sergei Averintsev. It would be a mistake, however, to conclude that her work lacked any public connotation at that time: even if none of her works could be published before 1989 due to Soviet censorship, nevertheless her verses began to circulate widely through samizdat and emigré circles¹². Since the 1990s — as new communication spaces began to emerge — Sedakova has published many articles and essays of literary criticism, primarily on topics relating to ethics, philosophy, and theology for the most renowned Russian cultural periodicals¹³. She is particularly concerned with questions of tradition, the role of art and culture in contemporary society (totalitarian, post-totalitarian and post-secular), freedom, Christian eschatology¹⁴. Since 1991, Sedakova has been a fellow in the Section of Christian Culture (Institute of World Culture, Department of Philosophy) of Moscow State University, which was headed by Averintsev from 1992 until his death and she gave lectures and seminars in Europe and the United States (Keele University, the University of Wisconsin-Madison and Stanford University, among others). Furthermore, in the last twenty years she has given several interviews that have been published in periodicals and websites, not just in Russia but internationally as well¹⁵. Her most recent work — a new Russian translation of Dante's *Purgatorio*¹⁶ — demonstrates, in this instance, that her intellectual activity strives towards the "addressee"¹⁷. An at-

12. The first publication of a collection of her verses — "Vrata, okna, arki" — took place in Paris, through the publishing house YMCA Press [Sedakova 1986].

13. "Inostrannaia literature", "Kontinent", "NLO" and "Znamia" among others.

14. The essays that had been written before 2010, have appeared in the fourth volume of her works, under the title "Moralia" (see O. Sedakova. Chetyre toma. V. 4 : Moralia [Sedakova 2010c]).

15. A collected volume of her interviews has recently been published under the title: "Veshchestvo chelovechnosti : Interviu 1990–2018" [Sedakova 2019].

16. This is a collaborative work that takes place within the seminar "Perevod Dante" ["The translation

of Dante"] held by Sedakova organised by "Arzamas academy". URL: <http://7seminarov.com> (accessed April 15, 2019).

17. Sedakova has translated a great number of poets and writers since the Soviet era (among others, John Donne, Emily Dickinson, Rainer Maria Rilke, T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, Paul Celan, Paul Claudel, Paul Tillich, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Francois Féder): a collection of her translations has been published in: Ead. "Chetyre toma. V. 2 : Perevody" [Sedakova 2010c]. Moreover, she has translated Liturgical poetry, see: Ead. "Mariiny Slezy. Kommentarii k pravoslavnomu bogosluzheniiu. Poetika liturgicheskikh pesnopenii" [Sedakova 2017].

titude towards “transmission” of cultural content lies at the heart of Sedakova’s commitment, that aims to provide contemporary Russian readers with a “living” text that carries a message: «Modern culture and literature... lack of great hope and Dante is the poet of that kind of hope. The modern man doesn’t know where to find such a hope anymore» [*Il mio nuovo Dante*]. Ultimately, her path has crossed with the Transfiguration Brotherhood. In time, she became a member of the Board of Trustees of the SPHl and regularly attends conference and festivals that deal with relevant topics within contemporary Christian anthropology¹⁸.

The public commitment shown by Averintsev and Sedakova is not to be found in political acts or statements: in this respect, they differ substantially from the XIX c. *intelligentsy*, the dissidents *strictu sensu* and the majority of European public intellectuals of the XX c. In a 2012 interview Sedakova affirms: “[Intelligentsia] serves the people. The intellectual serves the culture” [*Mozhno zhit’ dal’she*, 385]. Averintsev and Sedakova do not deal *directly* with social or political themes that go beyond their individual competences, rather, their efforts aim to overcome the limitations of space and academic lexicon, so that culture may become *paideia*, education in the social domain¹⁹.

In the second part of this paper, I will provide a more detailed overview of Averintsev and Sedakova’s interpretation of culture by using the concept of Christian humanism²⁰: the classic themes of Humanism — return to the sources, translation and centrality of humankind — that have been reinterpreted by these two Russian thinkers — will provide the framework for further analysis.

The selection of source material is the result of a precise choice, i. e. to include their speeches made for non-academic audiences — and,

18. See e. g. two of Sedakova’s essays that are highly relevant to point out her intellectual perspective and have been presented during SPHl conferences, respectively in 2005 and 2006: “On the Nature of Tradition” [*Sedakova 2010l*] (Russian original: О природе традиции. URL: <http://www.sedakova.narod.ru/artc/trad.htm> (дата обращения: 15.04.2019)) and “Freedom as Eschatological Reality” [*Sedakova 2010f*] (Russian original: Свобода как эсхатологическая реальность // О. А. Седакова. Четыре тома. Т. 4 : Moralia. М. : Русский фонд содействия образованию и науке, 2010. С. 13–29).

19. This interpretation of the function of culture did not arise in the Russian intellectual domain through Averintsev and Sedakova. As noted by Adriano Roccucci,

Averintsev transmits Mikhail Bakhtin’s idea of culture: “The anthropological and the cultural dimension intertwine within a perspective that tends to overcome the separation between life and culture and to track in the structures of culture the traces of what deeply and substantially pertains to the human being” [*Roccucci, 107*]. Both Averintsev and Sedakova have written about the importance of Bakhtin’s thinking on the formation of their intellectual perspectives: see e. g. S. Averintsev “Bakhtin, smekh, khristianskaia kul’tura” [*Averintsev 2005*]; O. Sedakova “M. M. Bakhtin — druga versii” [*Sedakova 2010k*].

20. Referring to “Christian Humanism” I mean the intellectual perspective of two Orthodox lay authors, Sergei Averintsev and Olga Sedakova, who believe

with regard to Averintsev, some of his homilies — many of which are linked to the life of the Transfiguration Brotherhood.

There are two reasons for the aforementioned selection: on the one hand, it seeks to provide textual examples that could prove their exercise of intellectual function as *paideia* and, on the other, it promotes an interpretation of their work that acknowledges the perspective of their public role. A proper inquiry into their thought processes cannot disregard the understanding of the task that they aimed to take on as intellectuals: these non-academic speeches provide, in this respect, the key to accessing their intellectual perspective — a key that may prove useful when also investigating their scientific works.

The “transmission” of a New Christian humanism

On the Nature of Tradition: Human Being as Homo Haeres

The issue of tradition, both the cultural legacy of the past and the responsibility to pass down this legacy to future generations, has for Averintsev and Sedakova a very particular significance — one that needs to be understood on the basis of the historical framework in which their reflections developed, namely the late Soviet period. The term “tradition” did not assume a negative connotation as the “coercive imposition” of models of the past, but meant exactly the opposite, namely the possibility to access what T. S. Eliot defined as the «accumulated wisdom of the past» [*Eliot, 21*]. Sedakova writes:

It’s hard for us Russians to understand the states of spirit that produce Western counter-culture and assaults on tradition viewed as a repressive structure, when for us the least contact with tradition possesses an enormous power to liberate [*Sedakova 2007, 6*].

that the recovery of cultural tradition interweaved with spiritual religiosity represents a way out of the “ordinariness” without transcendence caused by the Soviet totalitarianism. According to them both, re-establishing the broken ties with the sources of culture (both Russian and Western, both Christian and secular) may give the human beings the chance to rediscover themselves as beloved creatures, open to the Otherness and the transcendence. This definition has already appeared both in sources and in recent literature devoted to their thinking. Sedakova uses it referring to Averintsev in 2005: see “Sergei

Sergeevich Averintsev: k tvorcheskomu portretu uchenogo” [*Sedakova 2005, 38, 52 etc.*]. About Averintsev, see also: A. Kahn, M. Lipovetsky, I. Rayfman, S. Sandler “A History of Russian Literature” [*Kahn et al., 598*]. About Sedakova see B. Paloff “If This Is Not a Garden: Olga Sedakova and the Unfinished Work of Creation” [*Paloff*]. (Russian version: Паллофф Б. Если это не сад : Ольга Седакова и незавершенная работа творения // Ольга Седакова: стихи, смыслы, прочтения : Сборник научных статей / Ред. С. Сандлер и др. М. : Новое литературное обозрение, 2017. С. 494–521).

In her work from the 1990s, Sedakova reflects on the issue of tradition, aware of how problematic this topic has turned out to be, both in post-Soviet Russian society and in the secular West. In a conference organised by St. Philaret's Christian Orthodox Institute in 2005, Sedakova delivered the speech "On the Nature of Tradition" ["O prirode traditsii"], which was specifically focused on the theme of tradition «in the general cultural meaning» i. e. «as a thing that pertains to a human being as such» [Sedakova 2010l, 168]. Tradition is read here as a key feature of human experience and of the human being as «*homo haeres*, a being inheriting and transferring inheritance» [Sedakova 2010l, 169]. This interpretation of tradition corresponds fully with the thesis of Sergei Averintsev. According to him both culture and intersubjectivity pertain to the very essence of human experience: «We all share one and the same trait: we are not hermits. <...> There is no lack of culture in terms of a clear, empty, zero level» [Averintsev 2007b, 166]²¹. And thus, Averintsev argues: "What we call absence of culture is not absence of culture; indeed, it is always bad culture. <...> There is no empty space: the void is fulfilled with something else" [Averintsev 2007b, 166].

The image of tradition that emerges in Sedakova's speech lives inside the "cultural *continuum*" outlined by Averintsev, which flows more spontaneously in some epochs and significantly less in others. Sedakova points to the break in that *continuum* "a sign of our time. The transference does not work ... something has been broken in our civilization" [Sedakova 2010l, 168–169]. This break is ascribed to the fact that the positive meaning of tradition, as heritage in constant evolution in its passage from one generation to another, has been replaced by a kind of mockery (i. e. the "bad culture" mentioned by Averintsev. — V.P.): the dynamic sense of tradition vanished to leave in its place the opposite, namely a static set of «superpersonal set of values, prescriptions, prohibitions, permissions» [Sedakova 2010l, 169]. This opposing form of tradition assaults the individual, who is crushed under the weight of a strange and impersonal strength: if this is tradition, then "a separate person can experience it as an element alien to what s/he knows in him or herself as undoubtedly 'his or her

21. This text, entitled "Khristianstvo i kul'tura" ["Christianity and Culture"], is a transcription of a speech delivered by Averintsev at the Sixth Conference of the Transfiguration Brotherhood "Miriane v cerkvi" ["Lay People in the Church"], that took place in Moscow on 17th–20th August 1995.

own” [Sedakova 2010l, 169]. The two main reactions to this image of “tradition” are opposite and symmetrical: the drastic refusal of this coercive and anti-individual force (deconstruction/relativism) or the unconditional reception of the concept of tradition as an ensemble of “rules” (fundamentalism/new traditionalism)²². If we considered the concept of tradition as most closely connected to the words “constancy” and “steadfastness”, there would be just two ways, Sedakova acknowledges, to relate to it: “either by joining some extremely rigid norm or, to the contrary, by deciding that no norms work any longer” [Sedakova 2010l, 171]. Averintsev describes the social consequences of this reduction of tradition — and namely of Christian tradition — to a limited set of rules:

The contemporary bourgeois... the contemporary conformist — i. e. a man who wants to be the same as everyone else — can only hear hyperboles, extreme and simplistic judgements. It is hard to convince him to be a believer, but it is easy to persuade him to be a fanatic [Averintsev 2007b, 168].

When spiritual contents of culture expire, and so it happens to the vitality of tradition, nothing else remains but the mimetic conformism and the gross simplification of fanaticism.

The core of Sedakova’s thesis emerges in the next passages of her discourse: it is possible to escape from this apparent either/or of extremes by reconsidering the very notion of tradition itself, taking it back to its proper dynamic width. The tradition outlined by Sedakova — the same that she viewed as playing a crucial role in restoring a sense of authentic humanity during the Soviet years — is not a set of norms and conventions, but the voice of a break. When Sedakova reconceives the concept of tradition as *predanie*, she refers to the etymology of the term: «If we believe the very word *tradition*, then in the Russian tradition it will be ‘trans-giving’» [Sedakova 2010l, 171]. The nature of “transference” applied to tradition does not contradict its essence, according to Sedakova: «The question is not whether traditional things are stable or unstable. The important thing is that the moment of transference is accented in this word: something is transferred, passed from hand to hand» [Sedakova 2010l, 171]. What tradition clearly entails, in this perspective, is «change», to the extent that Sedakova points out that without change «it cannot be imagined»

22. See more: [Sedakova 2010k, 175].

[*Sedakova 2010l, 171*]: in this “translation” (this word is used with reference to the Latin verb *traducere*), there is continuity and break. This interpretation of tradition stands at the heart of a homily delivered by Averintsev in 1993, focusing on the issue of the Holy Scripture. In the process of translating historical and theological reflections for the community gathered in the church at the Sretenskii Monastery in Moscow²³, head dressed the issue of the Gospel tradition in terms of a call to responsibility:

And the words of the Gospel will speak again to every new generation. In a certain sense, what has been interpreted and clarified — as correct and true as it might be... is a word that has already been said. The words of the Gospel possess novelty like nothing else, because they are addressed to us and, in some way, it's our task to interpret them with our life [*Averintsev 2007c, 90*].

It may be concluded that tradition, according to Averintsev and Sedakova, does not lose its character of *auctoritas*, but the authority at stake here is “alive”: it broad casts a message that changes because it changes whomever receives it. Far from being a coercive and impersonal force, tradition is rather a precious resource given to everyone, as stated by Boris Pasternak. Sedakova quotes him here: “To all of us tradition used to appear and to all it promised to give a face” [*Sedakova 2010l, 169*].

Translation: The Search for a living language

For Averintsev and Sedakova, tradition as “translation” is both a necessity and a task inherent to the cultural sphere and, as such, it demands a responsibility towards one's own time. According to an image evoked by Sedakova, the words of tradition have the potential to subvert our existences: “And a certain phrase, written 800 years ago, detonates our everyday prosaic life, no less than an unexpected call in the middle of the night” [*Sedakova 2018, 5*]. Both Averintsev and Sedakova argue that the rejection of any kind of tradition, or even a hypertrophy of tradition in the contemporary age has paradoxical-

23. This homily is a particularly relevant testimony of Averintsev's efforts to pass on contents that he had initially elaborated on within an academic context. Here he talked about his travels around Europe (Rome, Berlin and Alsace) during which he delivered several speeches on the relationship between Christianity and

culture. His opening words represent well his attitude towards his audience: «With a great deal of embarrassment and for the sake of obedience, I will try to tell you something, so that everything in our lives may be shared» [*Averintsev 2007c, 87*].

ly highlighted not so much the death of tradition, but the need to make explicit its relationship to novelty. Averintsev pointed out the importance of this task during his speech to the Italian Chamber of Deputies in 2002:

What can the Biblical and the Ancient Greek traditions offer us today? <...> ...We cannot take all this as something that is simply “given”; in some way, we must find it, rediscover it today [Averintsev 2013a, 469, 471].

Sedakova also sees how crucial this task is during our epoch: «A challenge to make explicit something that has been but semi-consciously handed from person to person through the centuries» [Sedakova 2010n, 700].

Just as the “translation” of a written text stems from the need to make it speak in a new language, that is, to communicate its message through a lexicon understandable to a different audience, the “translating” of tradition is always a matter of language. However, the issue of language itself raises a number of further problems that the two authors do not underestimate. In an interview that took place in 2014, Sedakova notes that language itself may crystallise and become a mere reproduction of forms without content: “human words are constantly at risk of ceasing to speak, and then sequences of words will simply flow *past utterances* like some indifferent element of ‘ready-made words’” [In *Praise of Poetry*, 413]. In 1996 Averintsev wrote the long essay “God’s Word and the human word”. In this he identifies the weakening or “act of deconstruction” [Averintsev 2013b, 113] of language as the root of what he defines as the “post-atheistic condition” [Averintsev 2013b, 113]: “Nowadays, a whole new challenge — one that has taken over from the dying atheism — stands against faith in Revelation, i. e. the lack of faith in the word, *per se*, hostility towards the Logos” [Averintsev 2013b, 109–111]. Averintsev openly rises to this new challenge, however, at the same time, he recalls that the awareness of the “weakness” of language was not conceived during the XX c. On the contrary, this issue is already addressed in the biblical text:

...But is it true, is it reliably a word that shares the weakness of the human being? <...> Experience suggests for the psalmist a thought that he expresses, even though he considers it reckless: “All men are liars” (Psalms 116:11) [Averintsev 2013b, 107].

At the same time, on the basis of the antinomic pattern that characterises his thinking²⁴, Averintsev affirms the power of language:

The clumsy, laboured, at times badly articulated human language that clothes God's Word is, in its turn, an aspect of the kenotic condescension assumed by the Logos for love of us. <...> ...Human word ...is *capax Dei* [Averintsev 2013b, 103].

At this stage there are two main issues outstanding: which kind of human word may act as a medium in the translation of tradition and what does the «something major» consist of in order that it be transmitted «besides the list of necessary information» [Sedakova 2010l, 172]. Two reflections, made by Sedakova and Averintsev respectively, provide the key in accessing their elaboration of the two issues. On the one hand, Sedakova, speaking about the role of Dante in the history of culture, affirms: “[Dante Alighieri] had under taken ‘personally on his own behalf’ to speak about ‘final things’ and to speak about them in people’s profane language” [Sedakova 2010h, 92]. On the other, Averintsev, with the characteristic calmness of his thinking, makes an assertion that many would consider to be highly unconventional: “First of all, the idea of a special sacred language as the one and only through which Revelation speaks, was alien to Christianity from the very beginning” [Averintsev 2013b, 101]. Therefore, both authors reflect on “profane” language and concur in affirming its peculiar strength: it has been the vehicle for Revelation and it is capable to speak about “final things”. The renunciation of a sacred language is also an invitation to embrace our creatural condition, with all the risks that this entails and with the responsibility of not complying with those “act(s) of deconstruction” that deprive us of the words that build the life of a culture.

Two further textual examples provide a more detailed account of their position regarding the modality and the message of the translation. In 1998, when she was awarded the *Solov'ev Prize* at the Vatican, Sedakova spoke insightful words about the possibility of a new Christian art and therefore a new Christian language — one that is close to everyday language without being ordinary, and characterised by the mark of simplicity, which does not entail, never the less, a lack of meaning²⁵. She mentions Pasternak as an example of this “transla-

24. On the antinomic character of Averintsev's thinking, see [Roccucci, 108].

25. See more: [Sedakova 2010m, 225].

tion”: “But in Pasternak, the new Christian art began to speak of different things: about Creation, about Healing... about Life” [Sedakova 2010e, 225]. And therefore she remarks: “Who can say that this triad of the “last things” [doesn’t relate] to the roots of Christianity?” [Sedakova 2010e, 225].

Pasternak’s poetic lexicon, which is closely linked to the natural sphere, reveals a content that lies at the roots of Christianity, and namely that of Redemption. Averintsev further underlines the synergy between Pasternak’s contemporary poetry and the very core of the Christian tradition in a passage where he describes some constant characteristics of the Byzantine Easter, i. e. “the consecration ceremony (εγκαινία) for all creation and springtime... a natural and cosmic parable and simile of spiritual revival...” [Averintsev 2006b, 227]:

...Some analogies to the vision of spring as of cosmic, elementary Easter are to be found in Russian poetry of the twentieth century, that is, in Pasternak’s poem, “On Holy Week”, from his novel *Doktor Zhivago*, where the most concrete details concerning the reality of spring weather and ecclesiastical usage at the transition from the Holy Week to the Easter Vigil melt together, in order to prepare together the event of Resurrection [Averintsev 2006b, 227].

Their references to the poetry of Boris Pasternak can be interpreted as a trait of their Christian humanism: they have confidence in the vitality of language that allows the poet to evoke the intertwining of nature and Revelation in human existence.

Humanism: “There’s Something Good Inherent to You”

The humanistic work of Averintsev and Sedakova came at an historical moment in the XX c. in which the word “humanism” has been thrown into sharp crisis — by the outbreak of Nazism and Fascism, by Soviet totalitarianism, by concentration camps and the GULAG, and by the brutality of the Second World War. Nevertheless, several texts show that Averintsev, who grew up during that very context, was persuaded that the relation with the “other” always implies an act of trust, and not only of trust, but of faith:

...My heart, that was offended by the disrespect of the powerful at the time, cannot do otherwise: it aspires to give attention and respect to every person, even when it is necessary to tell the truth without embellishments [Averintsev 2013c, 515].

And he continues: “Faith and loyalty to each other on the basis of what we have suffered, call us not only to have tolerance, but also to have solidarity and, in some sense, to be united” [Averintsev 2013c, 515–517]. Sedakova recalls that Averintsev’s faith in humanity does not stem from an optimistic idealisation of its nature: “[Averintsev’s] thought constituted a sobering corrective to the enthusiasm of the beginning of the century, and, without it, any discourse ‘after Auschwitz and the Gulag’ would simply have been false” [Sedakova 2006, 75–76]. Far from precluding the possibility to have faith in humankind, this “sobering corrective” represents, on the contrary, the grounds from where it can flourish and a new criterion for reconsidering an either/or question: «More than anything, I would like to save myself from two symmetrically opposed kinds of stupidity: the Scylla of optimism and the Charybdis of pessimism» [Averintsev 2006a, 763]. Sedakova endorses Averintsev’s approach and, in her essay “The Issue of Man in Modern Secular Culture”, she identifies two extremes that make it impossible to develop an appropriate reflection on the *conditio humana*: on the one hand, the glorification of the image of the human as infallible and unfailingly looking for progress; on the other, the lack of confidence in the human being whose actions, when not wicked, are nonetheless imperfect. Sedakova portrays the consequences of the second extreme option in these terms:

What is a man? It is a traumatized, vulnerable, poor, sick creature devastated by its long history. There is nothing good about him: he, a poor victim, can easily turn into a slaughterer. And it is this creature that is to be preserved. And not asked for anything extraordinary, if possible [Sedakova 2011].

According to Sedakova, this way of thinking may pertain to both secular and religious perspectives. As regards the latter perspective that identifies the “human” with a “fallen nature”, she points out:

Yet, in some unexplained way, anti-humanistic Christianity ... has become something run-of-the-mill and left undiscussed. “Truly pious people” are often recognized by this “scorn” for the human [Sedakova 2010g, 243].

With regards to the first perspective, Sedakova cites the example of André Glucksmann who, ruminating on the tragedies of the XX c., suggested a new commandment, i. e. “The Eleventh”: “Remember the evil inherent to you!” [Sedakova 2011]. She therefore remarks:

Brilliant, this was an age-old doctrine of the monastic pedagogy. Yet there is one thing that was forgotten even more and perhaps it is time to speak about it again: “Remember that there is something good inherent to you” [Sedakova 2011].

This paradoxical perspective, which Sedakova expresses herself with a lexicon that sounds understandable even outside the religious sphere *strictu sensu*, is nothing but a translation of a key concept of Christian anthropology. Sergei Averintsev expressed the very same content in 1967, through the only *medium* available at the time to disseminate elements of Christian culture in the public domain, i. e. the entry “Philosophical anthropology” in the renowned fifth volume of the *Philosophical Encyclopedia*²⁶: “Whilst the image of God pertains inherently to human beings — although being a constantly profaned heritage — the likeness to God is not so much something given; rather, it is something assigned...” [Averintsev 1970, 355].

According to their humanistic perspective, Averintsev and Sedakova see the memory of the inherence of God’s image and of the potential assigned to humankind to achieve God’s likeness representing the key task of cultural transmission: “Being human cannot be taken for granted, instead it is a task. It is education, *paideia* that makes the man a human being. Education here takes the place that belonged to the archaic ‘second birth’, mystic or mysteric” [Sedakova 2010e, 74]. For Averintsev and Sedakova, culture as *paideia* is not a coercive force, but a voice that takes the form of friendship, of the desire for man to discover himself and his value.

May the Lord protect you,
as he protects us all.
Inside the rough and empty life
lies a treasure as if buried in a field
[Sedakova 2014b, 102].

26. The relevance of Averintsev’s peculiar entries has not gone unnoticed in Western Europe. While reviewing the volumes of the *Soviet Encyclopedia* in 1972, Paul Ehlen identified in these entries “an attitude which is different from that to which we have been accustomed and [that] seems due to the experience that Christianity is not disappearing under socialism but rather is representing a force which has to be recognized and not just simply denounced as an ‘opium’ (Marx and Lenin)” [Ehlen, 381]. Ehlen therefore focuses on the entry entitled “Christianity”

and underlines Averintsev’s attitude towards cultural “transmission”: «He not only provides an essentially correct description of the Christian message but also attempts to bring the reader to an understanding of these mysteries» [Ehlen, 382]. Furthermore, he describes this entry as a highly relevant and up to date contribution to political theology: “...we find here an account of Christian comportment in the world, far more adequate than many to be found in ‘political theology’ as currently being formulated in the West” [Ehlen, 387–388].

Final remarks

In 1988, during the television broadcast of his *Conversations on Russian culture*, Yuri Lotman spoke about the ways of communication in the Humanism of the XIV c.:

After any historical upheaval, there is a need for a cultural endeavour to reconstruct the communicative sphere, that is, a space in which the individual will be sure again to find interlocutors and will feel understood. An essential role in such an arduous cultural process, is played by the constitution of small collectives. Small circles... process norms that eventually become the norms of society. These circles always stand as laboratories of living culture, of ways of communication. <...> If small circles are missing, high culture is missing [Lotman 2005, 441–442].

It is no coincidence that Lotman's reflections on Humanistic culture seem also to portray the "marginal" spaces of late Soviet cultural life: while evoking Humanistic circles, Lotman was thinking indeed about the experience of the "School of Semiotics" that he founded in Tartu and Moscow in the 1960s. It is pertinent to mention that profound and systematic intellectual exchanges existed between Lotman and the intellectuals to whom this paper is devoted²⁷. The issue raised by Lotman — that of the decisive role of «small collectives» in restoring the communicative sphere of a society — is as worthy of attention today as it was then.

This paper has aimed to shed a little light on the work of two intellectuals who, although from a minority position, have sought to bear witness to the faith in the vital continuity of a Christian humanism around which the East and the West may meet beyond conflicts and historical contingencies. The friendship between Averintsev and Sedakova represents an example, amid so many that have taken place in the transition from the Soviet Union to the post-Soviet phase: other figures and small circles were and are still alive in this context. Their very existence represents, in my opinion, an invitation to broaden our perception of the "possible".

27. See O. Sedakova "A Journey to Tartu and Back: A Belated Chronicle" [Sedakova 2010a] (Russian original: Путешествие в Тарту и обратно. Запоздалая хроника // О.А. Седакова. Два путешествия. М. : Логос, 2005. С. 71–110.). I therefore recall that Averintsev has edited Lotman's *Sobranie sochinenii* [Lotman 2000].

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