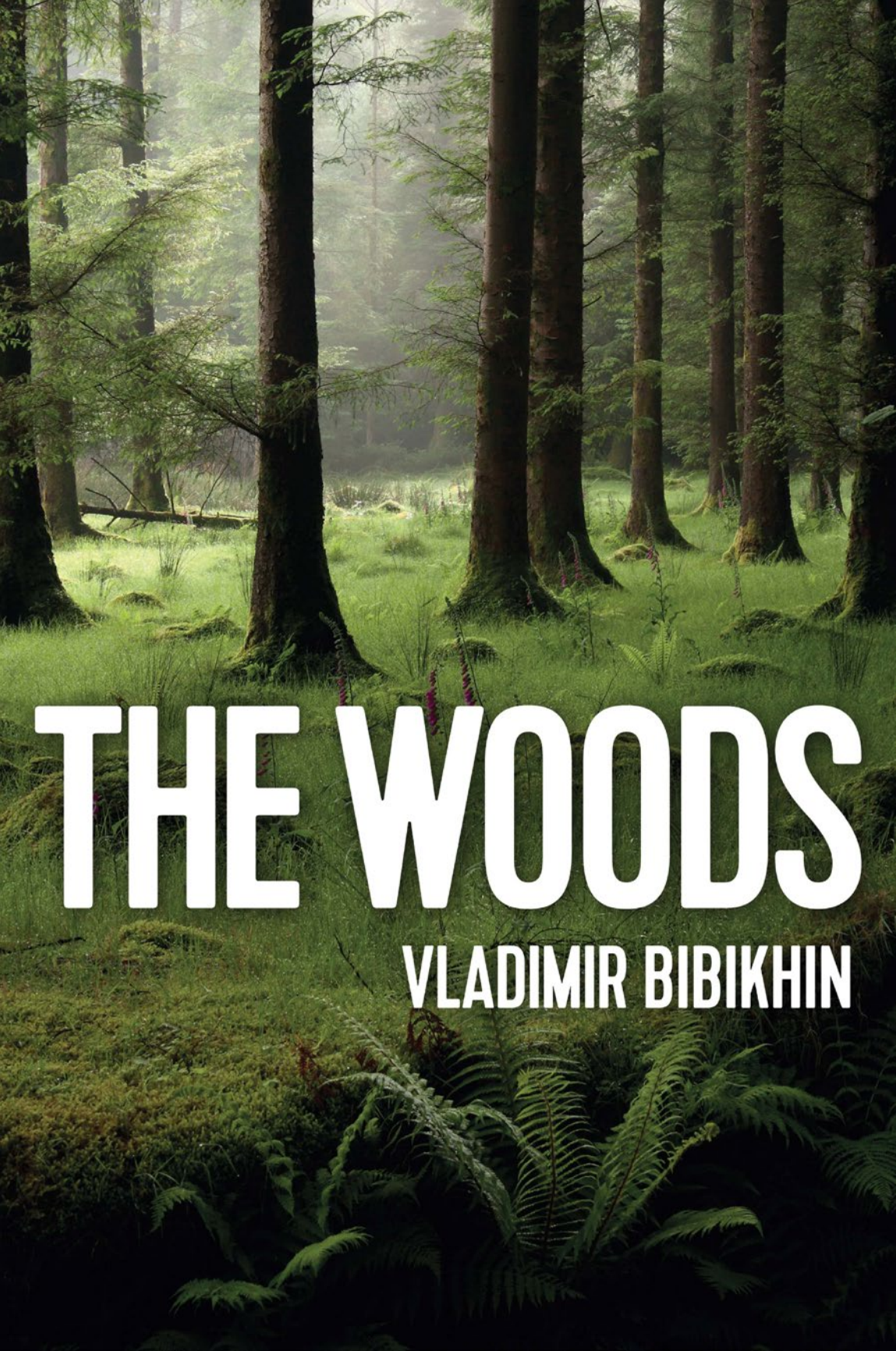
THE WOODS
VLADIMIR BIBIKHIN

The Woods

New Russian Thought

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The Woods
(*Hyle*)

Vladimir Bibikhin

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Foreword

This is the first book-length translation into English of the work of the Russian philosopher Vladimir Bibikhin (1938–2004). Bibikhin is recognized by many (myself included) as the most important Soviet/Russian thinker of the second half of the twentieth century. In the 1990s, his public lecture courses enjoyed immense popularity, the lecture hall was packed, and almost every course was later published as a solid philosophical treatise. Within some fifteen years, Bibikhin created an impressive oeuvre on the scale of a philosophical encyclopaedia. This work was 'marked' (to use his term) and remarkable for many reasons, including a virtuoso Russian style, freely flowing in unpredictable directions to express an original thought, to connect a foreign word to a Russian word, a metaphysical formula to the spirit of the times and to the lived experience of contemporary politics and everyday life. Bibikhin's was a free, original philosophy of genius which, nevertheless, was based on great erudition, some bibliographical research, and, as is clear with hindsight, was moving towards becoming systematic.

Bibikhin did not have a conventional academic career, and always characterized himself as a bit of a radical or rebel. In high school, he wrote something subversive in an informal school 'wall' newsletter, got a negative personal reference from the school principal, and for that reason failed to be admitted to the department of philosophy of Moscow State University. Instead, he served his time in the Soviet Army (from which most university students were exempted), then joined the department of foreign languages and spent his early life learning, with great proficiency, an impressive number of them: German, English, French, ancient Greek, Latin, and even Sanskrit. These studies, during which he met and studied under Andrey Zaliznyak, subsequently a renowned Soviet linguist, enabled him to develop an original hermeneutic theory of language, which he summarized in his dissertation (1977) and in his book *The Language of Philosophy* (1992). In the late 1960s, when a period of political freedom in the Soviet Union came to an end, as did the enthusiasm for Marxist doctrine, Bibikhin increasingly turned to religion and the Russian religious tradition, supported in this by that great survivor from early

twentieth-century Russian philosophy, Alexey Losev, at that time better known as an authority on classical Greek culture. He befriended such key Russian Orthodox intellectuals of the late Soviet period as Sergey Horuzhy and Sergey Averintsev, both open-minded and interested in the high culture of Western Europe. In the 1970s and 1980s, Bibikhin worked at translating numerous philosophical texts, from Aristotle and Nicholas of Cusa, to Heidegger, Arendt, and even Derrida. He developed his own virtuoso style of hermeneutic translation, seeking to make foreign thought, faithfully translated, as intelligible and organically Russian as possible.

Most of his translations of twentieth-century non-Marxist authors, as well as critical digests of their work, were published in a limited number of copies for 'special use', under restricted access. As Bibikhin himself explains, the communist authorities were considering whether to switch their ideology from Marxism to something more realistic and nationally orientated (as their heirs eventually did in the 2000s). They therefore engaged intellectuals to critically review European and American non-Marxist philosophy (which ironically helped convert these intellectuals to liberal or conservative ideas).[1] Only during Perestroika in the USSR (1985–91), during a reform of university teaching in the humanities, did Bibikhin, who at that time was best known as a Heidegger specialist, begin teaching at the philosophy department of Moscow State University. This soon ended, in 1993, because of a conflict with the more positivistically minded senior members of the department, and also Bibikhin's scattergun manner of teaching and researching. From then on and for most of the 1990s, Bibikhin did not have a university post. He obtained a position at the research-orientated Institute of Philosophy, and would just come to Moscow State University, since access to the building was then open, and teach in a lecture hall which happened to be unoccupied. He usually attracted a full house of students from all over the city. It was at this time that Bibikhin produced most of his numerous books, because he fully wrote his lectures out in advance and then read them to his audience. He spoke in a detached manner, in a rather high-pitched voice, creating the impression of a medium through whom the lecture was transmitting itself. It gradually became evident that the linguist and philosophical autodidact, who at first appeared simply to be rephrasing Heidegger, was actually an original philosopher in the process of creating his own philosophical system. He lectured on the world, the Renaissance, property, time, Wittgenstein, truth, wood, energy, and many other subjects. Importantly, Bibikhin was not a religious zealot remote from everyday life. His lectures were well spiced with irony and mundane examples. He drove a car (a rare thing at that time in the USSR for an academic), built his own wooden house in the country, married late for a second time, and was the father of

[1] Vladimir Bibikhin, 'Dlia sluzhebnogo pol'zovania' ['Restricted'], in: *Drugoe Nachalo* (SPb: Nauka, 2003), pp. 181–207.

four young children. Sadly, he contracted a cancer which killed him at the relatively early age of sixty-six.

To summarize Bibikhin's ideas without tracing their organic development and historical context is inevitably to do him a disservice. I must, however, follow the rules of foreword writing and attempt to do so. Bibikhin was extraordinarily well read, but I see him as influenced primarily by two philosophers: Martin Heidegger and Alexey Losev. Both were approximately contemporary, both were conservatives cherishing the classics above all else, but the former achieved fame while the latter was barely allowed to survive by the Soviet authorities, and concealed himself behind volumes on 'classical aesthetics'. In his thirties, Bibikhin worked as Losev's secretary (in 1970–2), and this left its mark on his style and attitudes, even though he rarely quotes his former boss (apart from in his early *The Language of Philosophy* and in a special autobiographical book dedicated to his conversations with Losev). As for Heidegger, Bibikhin became interested in his work, as, belatedly, did many other Soviet intellectuals, in the mid-1970s, when the German philosopher of 'being' was all but banned in the USSR.[2] Bibikhin became one of Heidegger's first Russian translators, with his rendering of *Being and Time* (1996) as a crowning achievement. This was after the fall of the Soviet system, at which time Heidegger became fashionable. When Bibikhin first started lecturing towards the end of the 1980s (late in life), the philosophical establishment had formed a stereotypical image of him as a 'Russian Heidegger'. This was gradually seen not to be the case: if some of Bibikhin's Russian concepts are close to Heidegger's ('the world', 'the event'), others are not. For one thing, Bibikhin is not particularly interested in 'being', 'death', or 'anguish'. He most readily takes from Heidegger everything related to event, particularly, the term 'other onset' from the *Introduction to Metaphysics*,[3] which became the title of one of Bibikhin's own books, devoted to the historical destiny of contemporary Russia. The entire tonality of Bibikhin's thought is different, however. In contrast to the ultra-serious and edifying ontological prose of Heidegger, I see his philosophy as centred rather on aesthetics, or, more precisely, on the aesthetic interpretation of phenomenology. This is a direct effect of Losev's teaching. Losev, after being politically persecuted for his philosophical work, camouflaged it under a multi-volume *History of Classical Aesthetics*. There was method behind this choice of disguise. For Losev, symbolic expression was the indispensable culmination of ontology. In retrospect, it seems clear that he had much more influence on Bibikhin than did Heidegger (whom Bibikhin read only as a mature adult). Bibikhin's notes on his conversations with Losev were published during his lifetime, with discussion of topics such as the primacy of aesthetics,

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[2] Ibid.

[3] Martin Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, 2nd edition, tr. Gregory Fried and Richard Polt (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014).

the holistic act of linguistic utterance, the role of etymologies, the value of harsh authoritarian systems from a philosophical point of view, and the philosophical relevance of colour. These topics later featured in Bibikhin's own oeuvre.

Subjectively, there was a third figure of major importance for Bibikhin, and that was Ludwig Wittgenstein. However, in my view this is less a case of following a tradition and more a case of an interpretation, and idiosyncratic reading, of the Vienna–Cambridge philosopher in an existential-phenomenological context. Bibikhin read Wittgenstein in his own way, disregarding most of the reception history and context of Anglo-American neopositivism. Wittgenstein is important for Bibikhin as a philosopher of intuition, of the this-ness of things, and of the inaccessible, aesthetic self-showing of the world. Wittgenstein's 'aspect change', a sudden Gestalt switch, is understood as the formula of a phenomenological event close to a conversion.

This said, Bibikhin's system of thought boils down to the following. There is an event, the 'lightning', which suddenly reveals the world in a new light and mobilizes the living being for near-to-impossible achievements. (In contrast to Heidegger, death is barely mentioned.) The event is thus a pure, festive effect whose ontological content consists primarily of unravelling and separating the contrasting aspects of being (the regular and the chaotic, the light and the matter, the masculine and the feminine). The event 'captivates' humans, entrances them, and forms a mission that gives them meaning. The event of captivation is not under our conscious control. We only become conscious of it retrospectively, which gives a special role, in the process of knowledge, to attention: the moment we notice something is the moment when our relation to the world, our mission, is decided. Captivation also allows the human being to capture things and lands, which grounds 'property'. Property, however, works both ways: things captivate people who capture them. (Before there was private property, there had already been property as such, where a thing opened itself up to a human in its uniqueness and its essential possibilities.) 'Energy', which the contemporary world exploits and longs for, comes from the capacity for a standstill, or an idle celebration (the 'energy of rest'). Against Modern activism, Bibikhin values careful attention to the event, which must come before any serious activity.

The event is, however, not all there is. It plays out the contrasting poles of the world which, taken together, constitute what he calls the 'automaton' of the world (Aristotelian spontaneity or the Leibnizian machine of machines) and equates it with 'Sophia', the central concept of Russian religious philosophy. Being rather critical of Russian religious philosophy, and particularly of its recent, nationalistically motivated, resurrection in Russia, Bibikhin nevertheless accepts and esteems Sophia: in Orthodoxy, a force of facticity and plurality in God. The rhythmic automaton of the world is Sophia, because it is a way of gripping contraries together, and because it is, and should be, beyond human control or calculation.

Both Sophia and the event have, for us, two faces: the freedom that inspires enthusiasm, and the iron, authoritarian law that governs the essentials. Bibikhin is consistently attentive to, and sympathetic towards, the phenomena of law, discipline, and grammar, which he derives from the 'harshness' (*zhestkost'*) of the event's imperativeness. He therefore values the Western culture of 'early discipline' (rightly understanding that the difference of Western culture from Russian is its respect for law) and contrasts it with an anarchic unpreparedness but attentiveness to an event, which he attributes to Russian culture. However, even in the Russian and similar cultures, there are 'harsh' phenomena, such as *krepost'* (a system of peasant serfdom) or, later, 'totalitarianism', which Bibikhin understands, neutrally, as a society with an unusual level of regulation and control. Thus, in the present book also, the irrational element of 'the forest', or matter, a phenomenological form of being, not a thingly substance (a reading which reminds us of Losev's Neoplatonic '*meon*'), only makes sense in interaction with the harsh, iron formatting of the gene-based '*eidos*'.

What does this all mean in the present historical context? Bibikhin started his public teaching, and most of his writing, in a revolutionary period when the Soviet Union was undergoing democratic reforms, before collapsing and heading into a period of neoliberal changes led by a weakened state. This revolutionary situation created a space of freedom for new ideas and initiatives, and hunger for new, unofficial and non-Marxist, philosophy. (Marx and Lenin are barely mentioned in Bibikhin's writings.) This is the window of historical opportunity which provided Bibikhin with his platform and his mission. But the ideological content of the revolution and the reforms was an alloy: liberal and democratic ideas were mixed, often in the same media and books, with a conservative and even traditionalist message. This is reflected in Bibikhin's thought: without ever designating his ideological stance, it is clear that, politically, he is navigating somewhere between liberalism and conservatism. Property (in things and industries) and energy (of oil and of creative labour), even if they are deduced back to their onto-aesthetic origins, are the words of the day, a concern of the new economy and new lifestyle. The interest in Wittgenstein (and, in the present book, in Darwin) reflects Bibikhin's deep empathy with Western rationalism. There are, however, obvious conservative elements too. Bibikhin writes *The Law of Russian History* and, later, *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Law*, in which he discusses and essentializes a specifically Russian historical trajectory and destiny. Orthodox religion, understood in a philosophical way as a religion of an absent God beyond rational discourse, is very present in his writings, particularly in the present book, where the Cross becomes an epitome of the forest. Bibikhin also shares Heidegger's disdain for activism. Conservative, and typical of the time in Russia, are his views on gender (where he values a contrast between a marked masculinity and marked femininity).

Bibikhin's main interest was in German philosophy, but he also knew and cherished the contemporary French tradition. He read, and even

translated, Jacques Derrida, arguing against some of his interpretations. His strategy of writing books in the form of lecture courses targeted at a wide audience may have been a conscious emulation of the strategy of such great French public intellectuals as Lacan and Derrida.

Accordingly, when Bibikhin addresses the current moment, he refers to it, in awe, as a 'revolution' or 'renaissance'. Reminiscences of Peter the Great's reforms, or of the Italian Renaissance in the fifteenth–sixteenth centuries, help him understand a time of changes in Russia. It is always the extreme effort, the openness of freedom (beyond traditional morality), and festive colour that open everything up. In the Italian Renaissance, erroneously thought by some conservatives (including Losev) to be the beginning of a nihilistic sceptical age, 'the human essence reduced itself, in philosophical and poetic anthropology, to a few simple traits: selfless love, tireless activity (mostly of the higher faculties of the soul), informed attention to the world.'[4] Extreme ambition was characteristic of that age: 'Dante reports [...] that the task of his great poem was nothing less than to "lead the living out of their misery to the condition of happiness."'[5] It is the scale of the ambition that is important.

However, in every case there comes a default, or a breakdown (*sryv*) after the event, mostly due to the hubris of human subjects who put all their faith in themselves and disregard the pressures of history, which leads to an avalanche of violence. The description is reminiscent of the German 'conservative revolution', only this time combining the liberal and conservative elements.

Bibikhin himself was a 'Renaissance Man', with unbelievable energy and willpower (in the 1990s, he produced two book-length lecture courses each year), and an anarchic disdain for convention. The first impression he made was of a slightly lunatic intellectual with a posture of exaggerated humility. This was wrong on both accounts. As mentioned, he was not just a professional translator but also a competent manual worker. And he displayed impressive personal ambition and originality in his philosophical projects.

When we read Bibikhin's book today, we will probably appreciate his genius, but we need also to be aware of the historical distance, short as it still is. We need to remember that Soviet culture was isolated from Western culture to a greater degree than the 'normal' isolation of different cultures such as British and French. American, British, and French books were available, but:

- only to a closed academic elite
- there was a long delay before they became known

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[4] Bibikhin, *Novyi Renessans* (Moscow: Nauka, 1998), p. 321.
[5] Ibid., quoting Dante, *Letters*, pp. 15, 39.

- only intellectual blockbusters were available, not routine intellectual discussion.

Libraries had very restricted collections of Western literature on the social sciences and humanities, and the access to some of that was further restricted for ideological reasons. In the 1970s, Bibikhin worked at INION, the Soviet Academy of Sciences' Institute of Scholarly Information on the Social Sciences. This institution engaged, as mentioned above, in digesting Western literature in the social sciences and humanities, in Russian, by trusted experts, in very small print runs and accompanied by ideological criticism. Bibikhin thus had privileged access to Western scholarship, though he regretted that he heard of Heidegger so very late. His experience at INION put him and his colleagues in the curious position of disengaged observers (which corresponded to his philosophical notion of the 'energy of rest'). This gave them an odd, decentred, outsider view of twentieth-century Western culture. It is hardly surprising that certain interpretations (like Bibikhin's reading of Wittgenstein) seem often really quite strange. He studied the reception literature only afterwards: the first encounter of Russian thinkers with Western thought was without critical context.

Conversely, the West knew very little about Russian intellectual life. There was a discrepancy not just in the scholarship, but also in the general approach of critically thinking intellectuals, which was libertarian (anarchic/conservative) in Russia, and ethical, rights-orientated, and left-leaning in the West.

After the collapse of the USSR in 1991, the situation did not change overnight and, lacking the Internet, Bibikhin in the 1990s was still proceeding in a bibliographical vacuum, with limited knowledge of intellectual concerns outside Russia. This did not prevent him from addressing the theme of environmental, biological philosophy in the present book. As you may see, many references in the book come from the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. This might seem unprofessional, but we need to bear in mind the situation and genre of the work, the fact that Bibikhin did not live to prepare it for printing, and to see that he did, nevertheless, get some key things in contemporary biology right.

Let me turn to the present book in more detail. There is little point in rehashing a work in a foreword, but perhaps a few words about Bibikhin's methodology, implicit assumptions, and conclusions here will be apposite. This volume contains one of his most coherent, extensive, and wide-ranging lecture courses, and includes most of his concepts and philosophical preoccupations. That is why it was singled out for translation.

Bibikhin's book has in fact two subjects, one logically following from the other. The first one, as announced in the title, is the concept of matter, '*materia*', or in Greek, *hyle*. Because the word derives etymologically from wood or timber, Bibikhin enacts a phenomenological reconstruction of the notion by referring it not to an inanimate stuff that we master, but to the element of woods that surround and even entrance us. We are captivated

by the forest, but we have learned to carve a space for form within it. We return to intoxication with the forest when, for instance, we smoke and drink. Thus, Aristotelian 'matter' does not exist by default but is an important, substantial element of the world.

> [F]or humans there is no other law; because they are faced with substances in which they drown. Matter as the power of the forest, the potency of its materiality: the smoke of tobacco, the wine of Bacchus, narcotics, intoxication, ecstasy. The wood of the forest is the matter from which all else derives; it is not the timber of the carpenter but like passion, the race, the grove of Aphrodite, the smoke, the aroma of tobacco, the inebriation of Bacchus, of Dionysos, the intoxication of coca. The forest, then, is conflagration, the fire of passion. (This edition, p. 16)

Thus, matter is primarily living matter, which allows Bibikhin to spend most of the book discussing the essence and evolution of life, again from the phenomenological point of view. The phenomenology is backed, first, by a lengthy hermeneutic reading of Aristotle's *The History of Animals*, which takes seriously, in a philosophical way, Aristotle's descriptions of animal life, which have normally been treated as irrelevant mistakes. Secondly, Bibikhin reads some classical literature in evolutionary biology (Darwin, Tinbergen, Lorenz, Dawkins, as well as the great Russian evolutionary thinker Lev Berg).

The main questions Bibikhin poses here concern the reasons for the emergence of sexual reproduction, and, related to it, the reasons for the dual nature of life, split between the self-reproducing genes and the proteins. Bibikhin brilliantly summarizes the complex biological findings into a dualistic picture of the world, torn between strict repetition (the form) and free plasticity (of the matter), in the same way that the matter itself is relatively segregated into the light and the particles.

Sexual reproduction, says Bibikhin, has an aesthetic explanation. It is a mechanism of inducing polar contrasts, which is not necessary per se for the preservation of an organism, but turns life into a complex and interesting gamble. The need for sexual activity, again, entrances animals, puts them into a state of what Bibikhin calls, with a Greek word, '*amekhania*', loss of mind and of the capacity to move. But the condition is a clear-cut contrast, and the result, a strict law of repetition. When we then go into structural matters, we see a cruel, 'harsh' law of form, which governs the protein being and imposes a discipline, which then repeats itself in the law of instinct at the behavioural level (examples of birds and ants as captivated by cosmic tasks). There is thus a form found within matter itself (if we count life as an extended forest), and, moreover, I would suggest, based on Bibikhin's argument, a certain dialectic of trance and law. Form imposes itself on matter under the condition of a hypnotic *amekhania*, through a fascinating game of contrasts.

Again, this argument is not only backed by extended exegetic exercises but also illuminated by strokes of subtle observation and virtuoso interpretations. In addition, it has an ethical aspect pertaining to what Bibikhin calls the 'automaton' of life, its spontaneous energy. No need to meddle with this automaton, let it work while it works; there is a need only to fine-tune it and to respect the iron laws which it at times imposes. However, the automaton, alias Sophia, captivates humans and sets before them a task of extreme and ambitious effort. The book was written at a time of violent primitive accumulation of capital in post-Soviet Russia, and while feeling no great empathy with its protagonists, Bibikhin nevertheless tried to do them justice.

> Captivation and capture, captivation by capture, wit and wiliness are the only thing that works. Someone who can captivate and be captivated, capture the world and be captured by the world. [Darwinian] [a]daptation is essentially capturing the world in both these senses, and not necessarily only here on earth but also more widely. (This edition, p. 309)

This book by Bibikhin is perhaps his most overtly theological. Despite being a devout Orthodox Christian, he usually avoids explicitly speaking of God in his philosophy, treating him as something 'unapproachable', but here he makes an exception and actually discusses religion at some length. The forest, with its trance, is a site of natural religion, of a devout attitude to the mystery of life; it is also the site of the Cross, which was made of wood. The law of nature is, the author says, an immediate form in which grace is manifest. Life is sanctified and sanctioned by energy, of which a human ethical effort, a 'yes' to the world, is a part. The Russian word 'saint' (*svyatoy*) has a telling pre-Christian etymology of phallic tumescence.

One could say that Bibikhin's book is a lengthy commentary on Baudelaire's 'Nature is a temple where the pilasters/ Speak sometimes in their mystic languages.'[6] However, when finally considering God, Bibikhin says, after Feuerbach, that he is simply the human him/herself, but taken as the hidden Other in the human being.

By way of short commentary, I think that this book was partly an attempt to repeat and surpass the gesture of Heidegger, who in 1929–30, in *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*,[7] decided to ground his existential phenomenology in biology, but ended up reasserting a sharp divide between humans and animals which Bibikhin here, in contrast, seeks to undermine. The phenomenological conversion of matter, from a

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[6] Charles Baudelaire, 'Correspondences', in *Selected Poems*, tr. Joanna Richardson (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975), p. 43.

[7] Martin Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, Solitude*, tr. William McNeill and Nicholas Walker (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001).

thing to environment, methodologically reminds us of Gaston Bachelard's poetics of the elements.[8] The task of addressing the natural sciences from a philosophical point of view is extremely important, particularly now, with positivism on the rise in the life sciences. There are not that many authors who have done this. However, Bibikhin does not refer to the most famous of them, Henri Bergson. Sometimes his argument comes close to Bergson's *élan vital*, to his serious consideration of the rational nature of instinct. Bergson, however, does not yet know genetics and does not make an aesthetic argument. The lack of engagement with Heidegger or Bergson, like the rudimentary nature of some of the notes, has to do with the fact that Bibikhin died early and, as I mentioned, did not have time to prepare the manuscript for publication.

This volume is the first book-length edition of Bibikhin to appear in English. I think we chose one of his best works for translation. It contributes to our understanding of the meaning of life: a fascinating spectacle set up in a cosmic amphitheatre for the potential audience of humans and gods-in-humans. It sets itself the ethical task of rehabilitating the scale of human ambition as a sanctioning instance of being. It contains an important discussion of genetic Darwinism and natural selection in the spirit of Continental philosophy.

In all this, it may leave a foreign impression on the English-speaking reader, not only because of its impressionistic methodology and ethical pathos (common in both contemporary Russian and French philosophy), but also because of its conservatism and the extent to which it is embedded in twentieth-century Russian thought. I think this is a 'great book', in terms of its ambition, of the richness of its content, of its brilliant style, and of the popularity of its author at the time of its public delivery. Even though written recently, it must be seen both as a contribution to current debates and as a monument of its own time and space, on which it bestows the sanction of memory, and even a certain grandeur.

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[8] Gaston Bachelard, *Psychoanalysis of Fire*, tr. Alan C.M. Ross (New York: Beacon Press, 1987); and *Water and Dreams: An Essay on the Imagination of Matter*, tr. Edith R. Farrell (Dallas: Institute of Humanities and Culture, 1999).

Introduction

The ancient Greeks' awareness of wood as a versatile substance which could be consumed by flame to produce different forms of energy ensured that the term ὕλη (*hyle*, wood, timber, forest) should be adopted to designate matter. Facilitating its adoption was the use of the term in ancient medicine, hence in biology. With its non-metric space (notions of the biological cell as a tropical forest), through imaginings of a primaeval, hairy human living in the forest, through the mythopoiesis of the World Tree, through the return of our contemporaries (who have turned their backs on nature) to such surrogates of the forest as wine, tobacco, and narcotics, *hyle* is far more present in the daily reality of modern humans than we care to admit.

The powerful presence of the forest is underappreciated. It is to be found in the philosophical concept of *hyle* (matter) in religion and theology (the Cross as World Tree), and in poetry (in images of the tree, the bush, and the garden). We are surrounded by the forest, and what seems so personal to us, our own thinking, is no less affected by it than are our bodies. The forest is all around.

Modern science's periodically renewed interest in the biological treatises of Aristotle and his school is fully justified. We shall find that in his biology, *hyle* is not viewed as being in contrast to form, *eidos*, whose opposite is 'formlessness'. The female principle of matter is found to contain the entire potential for development. We need to link the so-called spontaneous generation of living things in Aristotle to his interest in parthenogenesis. To *eidos* as the male principle he ascribes the role of the historical, purposeful meaning of motion, its dynamic supported by the material, female, and maternal principle.

The topic of *matter* is one of the most difficult in Aristotle. The difficulties are of two kinds: first, having propounded one thesis, Aristotle does not always feel obliged to be consistent and may later propound a contradictory one; and the second difficulty, for Aristotle himself, is that primary matter should not just be 'such', because then a different kind of matter would be conceivable. There could be two kinds of primary matter, or more, whereas primary matter must be primary. At the same time, Aristotle

emphatically refuses to remove matter from the category of things and see it as separate from them. Just as there is no donkeyness, other than purely imaginary, without a particular donkey, so matter is always 'just this'. Current trends in biological research have heightened interest in the practice, common in the classical world, of placing humans on a scale of living beings, in respect of morphology, physiology, and ethics.

The cosmic unity of life, or, more broadly, its unifying sensitivity (Tsiolkovsky, Vernadsky), complicates discrimination between inanimate and living matter.[1] (Neo-)Darwinism as a principle of systematic replacement of life forms needs to be reconsidered in the light of adverse selection and non-stochastic development (nomogenesis). Overall, the views of Lev Berg, compared with those of Darwinism, lose out by failing to take into account the importance of a gathering, concentrating, focusing, extreme element which is critical for life.[2] Berg leaves this role to natural selection, but only as a means of maintaining the *norm*. He discerns a significant role for deviations from the norm. Berg does not argue that the status quo of a constant natural dispersion of variants and deviations is preserved within a species, but that, although in every generation there is invariably a large dispersion, there is, through the action of Darwinian selection, a thinning out, a testing for vitality. Marginal forms are eliminated and the species reverts towards the norm. Berg quotes Karl Pearson's research into generations of poppies to the effect that every race is much more a product of its *normal members* than might be expected on the basis of the relative numbers of its individual representatives.[3] The same applies in human society: the dispersion of deviants, degenerates, and alcoholics is great in every generation, but in each subsequent generation, children, on the whole, again begin within the norm. If the number of children in poor health increases, then it is to a lesser extent than among adults. Typically, children are more normal than their parents. The opposite is less common. Attention needs to be paid to Berg's thesis. By itself, natural selection does not change the norm; for that to happen, other factors are needed. There is a great need to clarify the concepts of improvement, adaptation, fitness, and survival. When Darwinism, or selectionism, talks of survival of the fittest, if by 'the fittest' is meant only those most able to survive, we are looking at a pleonasm. This awkward fact has been noticed, but it is one of those instances where a striking expression takes on a life of its own.

In reality, 'survivors' and 'the fittest' are not synonyms and are even, in some respects, opposites. It would not be wholly absurd to say that the miracle of life is that the fittest do actually survive. Darwinism does more than present a picture of stray individuals, some of whom happen to be selected. We need to recognize that this array, this spread and these degrees of possibility are *objective.* It is *not* the fittest that exist and there is, moreover, no need to wait for the extinction of individuals or a species before concluding who does. Already in their behaviour, in their every movement and the profile of every living creature, the divergence between the fittest and the rest is obvious.

Researchers often naïvely judge success in terms of what they would see as success for themselves: that is, having a full stomach, being in good health and fertile. Clearly, however, other criteria are possible. Life is contingent on possibility and selection, where the criteria are uncertain. There are at least two of these, survival and fitness, and the correlation between them is uncertain. Only a total absence of fitness precludes survival, but the opposite does not follow: total retention by a savage beast of its savagery in the presence some hundreds of thousands of years ago of human beings led to extinction. When, after the radiation death of this planet, only the rats remain, their survival will not in any customary sense prove they were the fittest. Although logical analysis of premises is a rarity and everything is allowed to remain on the level of intuition, academic biologists might be surprised to know how often in assessing fitness they are applying a criterion that Konstantin Leontiev used for arguing against positivism. This was the criterion of 'flourishing complexity', which, while not excluding protracted observation, does not require it, relying less on observation than on sympathy and empathy.[4] We can also note, dotted around in the economy of nature, pre-existing niches of fitness, hospitable locations to which life forms are attracted and into which they are drawn. That 'strokes of luck' are a possibility in our world deserves to be considered alongside the observation by physicists that our part of the universe is itself a stroke of luck because of the clear segregation here of energy and matter. In respect of the attraction of life forms to fitness, it should be noted that in the behaviour of herds, including the human herd, we do not find a stochastic distribution of more and less successful forms of behaviour from 0% to 100%. Technically, according to mathematical probability theory, this could be the case, but life seems from the outset to be predisposed to hitting the target. In view of all this, it is proposed that Darwin's term 'fitness', in the sense of successful adaptation, should be replaced with the term 'goodness', in Russian *godnost',* 'to be good for something'. In the Indo-European languages, this word is in good company. The word for 'weather' in Russian is *pogoda*; in Slovenian, a related word means 'timeliness', 'ripeness', 'festivity', 'anniversary'; in Latvian, it means 'to hit the target', 'to gain'; in Lithuanian, 'honour', 'glory'; in German, there is *gut* and in English 'good'; in Greek, *αγαθόν*, *agathón*, 'good'.

For a life form to be good for something does not necessarily mean only that it is successfully adapted to a purpose: it may indicate that it is a celebration, a glory. There is a great deal of controversy surrounding selectionism and Darwinism's concept of natural selection, which we can sidestep by defining fitness as 'goodness'. We have no grounds to oppose the idea that the spread of possible forms of life, including forms of behaviour, is enormous, or that which of these are 'good' becomes evident *post factum*. We must not, however, overlook the fact that even *ante factum* a 'taste' for goodness, either immediate or after trial and error, determines or tends to determine the behaviour of living creatures (as evidence from ethology tells us). It resembles such things as joy and celebration, and

dictates not the content of behaviour but purely the form, in terms of gesture, brilliance, and beauty. This is born of anticipation that a pleasing action is possible in our world. We do not have to reject Darwinism and its random mutations and imagine that God has stored up a set of forms for future content into which life preforms itself. There are no ready-made anticipated forms, but something that argues in favour of an attracting, anticipatory effect of goodness is the absence of intermediate species in the gaps between those that have been successful. Darwin supposed they had just not yet been found. 'The explanation lies, as I believe, in the extreme imperfection of the geological record.'[5] Now it is almost conclusively clear that these intermediate forms have never existed. Nature can be compared to an artist whose works always find a place in the exhibition. 'Nowhere do we find monstrous forms such as would indubitably have occurred in the event that limitless variability was the rule' (Berg).[6] This makes it all the more pressing to find an explanation for the succession, and abandonment, of hundreds of millions of its forms in the course of life's history on earth.

The polarities of life are reflected in science in the contrast between the processes of feeding and reproduction; of proteins and nucleic acids; of symbiosis, inquilinism, parasitism, and xenobiosis; in the hypothesis of two lives; and in the 'tyranny of genes'. It appears helpful to view the cell as an anthill, a colony of lower physiological units, in the light of the fact that absolutely all organisms are in fact colonies and communities, and that life is fundamentally 'sociogenic'. All life is drawn towards other life and either assimilates or collaborates with it (symbiosis, inquilinism, parasitism, xenobiosis). The guiding principle is not so much the struggle for survival as an organism's ability to find its place, to compromise, to serve the interests of unity and of other organisms in a kind of 'egoistic altruism'.

Myrmecology, the study of ants, provides an opportunity to observe collective organisms. It opens up perspectives for understanding, on the one hand, the interaction of cells in an organism and, on the other, that of communities of living beings, including human beings. It also shows how expedient many processes in fact are which, if not closely examined, might lead to superficial conclusions. In ant colonies, we can observe age groups, a calendar, castes and caste-based laws, purposeful organization, training in personal hygiene, social education of the young, collaboration, mutual care, division of labour, general education, ethics, etiquette, taboo foods, donation, greeting, rituals of personal care, hygiene, incest taboos, language, care of larvae, medicine, metamorphosis rituals, honeymoon trips, deference to a leader, warrior castes, surgery, tool making, commerce, visiting, and meteorology.

This study reveals the importance of distinguishing between the true, living automaton and the mechanical automaton or robot; between genetic programming as against planning; of focusing on the distinctive features of the true automaton and how it copes with a situation of crisis, extreme stress, uncertainty, and *amekhania* (*aporia*). We find a degree of complexity that is not adequately observed using modern techniques of close study,

and a great subtlety in phenomena ranging from the 'unity of the genotype' to the compaction of the genetic programme of a large organism into a vanishingly small cell.

Ethology, the study of animal behaviour, especially in extravagant breeding behaviour, offers the prospect of a convergence of the humanities and biology. Rehabilitating the classical world's location of human beings in the animal realm enables us to review in a new, down-to-earth manner the history and purposes of the development of life on earth.

Analysis of geological, biological, and philosophical knowledge relevant to the history and current situation of life on the planet gives a clearer understanding of the prospects for human theory and practice to contribute positively to the process of life. These prospects are seen less in the area of global planning than in recognition by individuals and the human species at large of their potential role in moving life on earth in an auspicious direction.

Lecture 1, 2 September 1997

This autumn's semester is a direct continuation of the spring semester course on Principles of Christianity. There we sought to show what is intimate and personal to us in faith. There is always the wretched possibility that faith will be left a notional concept of merely historical interest, a construct in the science of theology, whereas what we are interested in is a fundamental hermeneutics or phenomenology, in the sense of Husserl and Heidegger, or a grammar in the sense of Wittgenstein.[1] In order to avoid any risk of straying into mental constructs and lexical exercises, of failing to notice what we are drowning in and merely enumerating concepts, we are going to take a large step backwards to first principles, until, like the defenders of Moscow, we can retreat no further.

Those words, 'behind us lies Moscow', whether or not uttered in 1941, were no less applicable in 1812.[2] Then Moscow was captured, but it caught fire or was deliberately set ablaze. Moscow was built mainly of wood, the most readily available material, intimately familiar, particularly in those years when the forests of Russia were all but untouched. For a Russian, for a Muscovite, the burning of that wood, that '*hyle*', was something personal. Leo Tolstoy tells us that a wooden township that has been abandoned cannot but catch fire; that is just something it will do. What is our attitude towards *hyle*? It continues to be very personal. Today we have a standing column of smoke over Moscow from the daily combustion of 10,000 tonnes of petroleum products. In this city alone, 30 million tonnes of fuel will be burned in a decade.

The origin of our main modern fuel is organic, mostly prehistoric 'floating forests', planktonic, free-floating algae, of which there were vast quantities in the water basins from 500 million years to about 30 million years ago. We heat ourselves and our homes and light our world with a bonfire of petroleum and coal; its combustion beneath pistons in cylinders moves mechanisms that catch fish for us, plough our fields, reap the harvest, and deliver the grain to our bakeries.

Just as humankind sat around a campfire in the forest in ancient times, so today it warms itself at a campfire diligently replenished (because who can bear to stand back and watch a fire go out?) with some 5 million tonnes

of coal and oil, which will add up to around 15 billion tonnes in a decade. We are starkly reminded that this is necessary by the fact that thousands of people die every day from not being close enough to the fire. Humanity, the greater part of which has managed to find a place more or less near the fire, does sometimes reluctantly glance across to those hapless others, and is acutely aware of those who have failed to find a place there. It sensibly, prudently, takes special care to keep the fire fuelled.

People say humanity will find other sources of energy, but the fact remains that by far the greater part of our needs is supplied today, as in the distant past, by burning the forest: no longer the forest around us, because that was all burned long ago, but faraway forests. Faraway not in terms of space, because those forests, too, have been felled, but from far back in time, from the millions of years before humanity appeared and after it appeared. At that time the forest was still close to human beings, not only in the sense that they lived in it, but also in the fact that they were themselves covered with abundant growth, a forest of hair. The forest encroached so intimately upon them that it comprised their very skin, their very bodies. There was far less need then to burn the forest because human beings were kept warm by this fur which covered and was part of their body. Was this the only way they were related to the forest?

A close relationship with the forest seems to continue among the so-called primitive tribes who live there now and whose abhorrence of tree felling is so deeply ingrained that, even when their communal ways are taken from them, for example when they are brought into civilized society, they never become loggers, will not work with chainsaws, on trailing tractors and the like. Violation of the forest is tantamount, as far as they are concerned, to violation of their own body, although no surviving furry human beings are known to science today. The hairy yeti still stalks our minds and inhabits folklore, close to modern humans. The yeti has no place near the fire either, but his is a different kind of distance from that of the unfortunates who would be glad of a place.

Just as modern humans are almost devoid of hair, so the earth today is losing its forests. More important, though, than the visible forests for fuelling the fire humans cluster round are those invisible forests from half a billion years ago now so tangibly present in the form of coveted coal and oil. Is there not, however, another way in which the forest is even more germane to how we exist today? There is indeed, and when we recognize that, several doors immediately open. For now, we shall only peep through them while deciding which one to enter. We are in a hall of mirrors.

Let us consider a burning wood fire. In his latest, as yet unpublished, work, Andrey Lebedev examines the etymology of *hyle*, the word for 'wood', 'forest', in ancient Greek and concludes that fire and conflagration are inherent in it; the etymology suggests flammability and burning.[3] Since the point is still under debate, let us leave it for now and pursue a different avenue of inquiry.

Besides today's forests, which are all but exhausted, and the ancient

forests, which are half-exhausted, one of the most significant sources of energy must surely be nuclear energy. Atomic energy can also be seen as a product of combustion, but of what? Even highly specialized knowledge will take us only so far here because of issues science has yet to resolve. We can, and commonly do, represent an atomic reaction as a kind of burning, an explosion, a fast-developing fire or a process of slow decay. But a burning of what? In autogenous welding, the elements of hydrogen and oxygen combust, combine, become a molecule of a different compound, water, cease to exist autonomously but remain unchanged as water. A thermonuclear reaction, too, involves elements – uranium, plutonium, hydrogen – but something transformative is done to the elements themselves. We are talking about changes not to elements but to matter itself: the transformation of matter into energy. That is, what is 'burning' is not wood, petroleum, or coal, not compounds of elements. In a thermonuclear reaction, what is burning is matter itself.

How curious that the original meaning of the word for 'matter' in ancient Greek philosophy is wood, forest. The word '*materia*' is Latin and its original meaning is primal matter. In Cicero, it is the matter of the world, of which everything consists and in which everything exists: *materia rerum ex qua et in qua sunt omnia*. This Latin philosophical term is a translation of that Greek philosophical term, *ὕλη*, *hyle*, whose primary meaning is 'wood'. It is entirely possible that the official, technical meaning of *materia* in Latin, then meaning 'matter' as it now does in Russian and English, only became primary within official culture, while in popular culture the main meaning continued to be combustible material and, more specifically, wood in the sense of fuel, firewood. That is, before it was squeezed out there, too, by the philosophical usage. In Latin, felling timber is *materiam caedere*. In one of the Romance languages, this expression became *madeira*, whose primary meaning is simply *forests*.

In atomic energy, then, in a thermonuclear reaction, if we want to avoid a lot of specialist terminology, we can say more or less accurately that what is being burned is actually *wood*.

Unexpectedly, our own philosophical language is telling us that what is burned in the promising new thermonuclear energy reactions is the matter of the world: 'wood'. In the light of this discovery, we shall exercise caution before deciding that *hyle*, meaning 'an area of land covered with trees' or 'timber', should take precedence over the classical philosophical meaning of 'matter'. Language in general does not arise from adding sememes together; its origins are as deep as dreaming. In the word 'wood' it refers to trees, to fuel, and to the matter of the world. Let us not, therefore, be in too much of a hurry to decide which meanings are original and which are derivative. May not the use of *materia* in philosophy as well be, not a departure from the original meaning of 'wood', but a return to it? For now it seems that, as soon as we get into the forest, we lose our way.

Let us approach the forest from a different angle. This other aspect has long been present and all we need to do is look at it attentively. There is

nothing new about comparing the world to a living being. No European figure has articulated such comparisons more comprehensively and clearly than Leonardo da Vinci, whom we will need to study closely. In this simile, the forests of the earth would correspond to the hair or fur on the body of a living creature. Here is one context:

> *… potrem dire, la terra avere anima vegetativa e che la sua carne sia la terra; li sua ossi sieno li ordini delle collegazioni di sassi, di che si compongono le montagni … il suo sangui sono le vene dilli acque; il lago del sangui, che sta di torno al core, è il mare oceano: il suo alitare è il crescere e decrescere del sangue … e il caldo dell' anima del mondo è il foco, ch'è infuso per la terra …*
>
> So then we may say that the earth has a spirit of growth, and that its flesh is the soil; its bones are the successive strata of the rocks which form the mountains; its cartilage is the tufa stone; its blood the veins of its waters. The lake of the blood that lies around the heart is the ocean. Its breathing is by the increase and decrease of the blood in its pulses … and the vital heat of the world is fire which is spread throughout the earth …[4]

The human body nowadays is not completely covered with hair. I cautiously say 'nowadays' in order not to be drawn into the debate over whether early human beings were or were not covered with hair. For the theory of evolution, the issue is not crucial because there are other hairless animals – elephants, for example. What is phenomenologically important for us is to note that in our minds, our myths, and our fiction, the bigfoot, the furry anthropoid, the child born covered with hair, *caesariatus*, recur regularly and are evidently dear to us. We are intrigued by the idea that human beings can be hairy. It makes them either frightening, like the *Leshiy*, the Russian wood demon, or auspicious, as suggested by *caesariatus* in Latin, covered with hair, having long hair.

What is not speculation but fact is that the parts of the body covered with hair are prominent, most notably the head, hence the mind. If the most distinctive feature of humans is intelligence, then the locks on their head are an indication of that. They are like a microcosm. The beard clearly has a demarcation function: men have beards and women do not, so, in a manner still under debate, that is an indication of gender. Science tells us that chest hair betokens the presence of androgens, while underarm hair suggests a vestigial role for odour in the life of the species.

In folklore, mythology, and poetry, hair in that part of the human body directly serving procreation may be called a grove, a forest, or a meadow in the forest. In a recent article, Andrey Lebedev analyses a passage about the Naassenes in that great work by Hippolytus (born before 170 AD, died 235), *Refutation of All Heresies*.[5] 'Naassenes' is the Hebrew name for the Ophites, of whom there were several varieties in the second century. The

belief they held in common was that Jehovah had created only the material world, transient and illusory, and that man would have been left mired in it and blundering about for eternity but for the revelation of the serpent, *ὄφις*, of which in the first book of the Pentateuch of Moses it is said that it first opened man's eyes to the abyss of the spiritual, by enabling him to discriminate between good and evil.[6] The serpent, however, did not show the way, and it was for this that Christ came, the Light of the material world. Refuting the Ophites, Hippolytus paraphrases their teachings about mystical descents to earth which, incidentally, follow the paths of Aphrodite and Persephone.

It seems to me intuitively – and that is all one can say until Lebedev's new etymologies of the forest are published – that wood-as-fire points us in a direction we need to think about. In his second article, while agreeing with attribution of the fragment about the sacred grove of Aphrodite to Empedocles, I would have argued with Lebedev's approach. In my opinion, it is a dead end when it separates the physiological, embryological, and anthropogenic realities in the thought of Empedocles from the philosophical and poetic metaphor: Lebedev thinks that scientific positivity requires remaining down to earth, and believes that, in talking about the meadows and groves of Aphrodite, Empedocles 'is describing metaphorically the female genitals'.

The tenacious, supposedly objective scholarly distinction between physical realia and poetry is neither self-evident nor factual. It proceeds from a questionable academic mythology that tries to distinguish what is a legitimate object of scholarly study from what is not. For example, the poetic. The delusion that anything properly scholarly and technical must be readily open to study betrays a blindness scholars allow themselves. We are not going to indulge in this blindness. [. . .][7] The supposed encompassing of the world by science and technology encompasses nothing. Their victory is a myth, and the scholarly euphoria over the triumphs of technology is no better than the delight of one of Leo Tolstoy's characters, a three-year-old girl who sets fire to hay in her log hut and invites her little brother to admire the splendid stove she has managed to light.[8] All will be restored to what is dismissed as 'poetic', to the 'gentle power of thought and poetry'.[9]

The meadow, the sacred grove, the forest in folklore and mythology, in poetry and philosophy, are in no way a mere metaphor for coyly referring to vulgar realia. We *first* understand the forest in industrial and aesthetic terms, and are then unable to find a better way of understanding the grove of Aphrodite than as a metaphor, a discreet euphemism, perhaps veiling with a fine phrase a nakedness we find embarrassing. Art has the ability to show nakedness in a way that makes it neither metaphorical nor physiological. Can words be similarly used to name the intimate? Indeed they can, and are, using metaphors like grove and meadow, *ἄλσος* and *λειμῶν*, between which Lebedev and other writers he refers to see 'a close association . . . in sacral contexts'. For Empedocles, a grove is not a metaphor for Aphrodite because, as Lebedev himself points out, he sees that the earth

itself is a uterus, the womb of humankind. Lebedev mentions Empedocles' enthusiastic cult of Aphrodite. The grove or meadow of Aphrodite is not some 'biological referential signifier' for us, and neither is *alsos* a 'metaphor for the reproductive organs in general conceived as a "holy precinct" with a walled temple-uterus inside', but rather quite the opposite. The biological referent, if present at all, is referring to the forest as something primal, as matter, as something maternal. Lebedev speaks of the sacred Temple of Nature in pre-Platonic thought, when its sacramental mystery is the formation of the embryo, the focal secret of life and of nature. It is a secret hidden from the profane gaze of ordinary men, but not from the probing insight of the philosopher proceeding along the path of mystical initiation. I would like to read in its entirety the remarkable conclusion of this article, which, as is often the case with Lebedev, opens up much broader perspectives than the primitive positivism about which I have been complaining.

> For our present purpose, it is important to notice that typologically *alsos Aphrodites* represents a variation on the theme of *Templum Naturae*, a recurrent topos in pre-Platonic thought. Here it probably connotes *ἄβατον ἱερόν*: the formation of the foetus conceived as a mystery of life is hidden from the sight of the *polloi*, but not from the intellectual eye of a philosophical *epoptes*. Thus the mystery initiation motif, *prima facie* eliminated from the fragment together with the Gnostic interpretation, is eventually restored as authentic, though in essentially different form: it has nothing to do with the mysteries of Persephone and Diesseits-Hades of the Naassenes, but relates to the philosophical rite of passage. The metaphorical complex of secret knowledge is well attested in *Peri physeos*. As a philosophical mystagogue, Empedocles leads Pausanias to the innermost sanctum of nature: the embryological treatise to follow upon the prefatory verses on the anatomy of the female genitals and reproductive organs will reveal to Pausanias the secrets of birth no mortal eye has ever seen. And the same metaphor conveys the fundamental idea of the holiness of life inherent in Empedocles' philosophy of cosmic Love.[10]

So it will be difficult for us, too, as we enter into our new topic of the forest not to follow the mass of the *polloi*; we shall proceed with caution.

Perhaps the first objection we anticipate, and to which it is important and helpful to respond, is that scientific positivism, whether secondary or not, is what we are familiar with. However, to see the grove and the forest as something sacred and mysterious, we need a trained, discriminating eye. Seeing the forest other than from a commercial or aesthetic viewpoint would not seem to call for preliminary training. People talk about getting lost in the forest. We have the saying that someone 'could get lost among three pine trees'; or, when baffled, we talk of being 'in a dark forest'. May the explanation of this – that you cannot see far in a forest, that there are no familiar landmarks – be only a rationalization of an experience that

in various guises many people have probably had, namely that being in a forest takes us out of metric space? The presence of trees, being among them, instils, or induces, or lulls us into a sense of – the range of vocabulary itself points to the singularity of the experience – something that does not lend itself to description. What the forest says to us – and the expression 'trees can talk' is yet another attempt to characterize the experience – causes a person to become confused and disorientated in more than a narrowly geographical sense.

Looking ahead, I will mention another way of talking about this osmotic quality of the forest: it is said to act like a drug, sometimes more, sometimes less powerful, depending on the experience. This power of the forest can be intimidating, and I will mention here a literary example to which we shall return: nausea, or perhaps more the sense of disorientation at sea, which the narrator of Sartre's *La Nausée* experiences in the vicinity of a tree or of tree bark.[11] Another example is the experience described by Vasiliy Belov, where a great pine tree evokes a sense of reverence in the person felling it.[12] We need not enumerate other instances because everybody has felt them at one time or another. There is nothing contrived or artificial about these; on the contrary, they are unexpected and amazing, but feel out of the ordinary only because our habitual ways of looking at the forest are utilitarian or aesthetic. How we came to develop that habit we need not go into, because much more interesting is how insecure it is, how ready to be displaced and to yield to the amazing experiencing of the forest.

A constant feature of the experience of the forest is how intimate it feels, even while it seems intimidating, as in Sartre or as in the figure of the wood demon. The fear that grips us in the forest is not of a kind that we can take practical measures against; it is too much a part of us. We find the demon seems to be within us and that what we fear in him is ourselves, different, altered. When the spirit of the forest is something we desire and are seeking, it feels near and dear to us.

The experience we have of our relatedness to the forest might seem to be pointing us towards the secrets of the sacred grove, through which initiation into the mysteries begins, and there is no call for us to rush to decide which interpretation, the philosophical or the gnostic, is better. Of one thing we can be sure, and that is that every interpretation will be lame, will flounder, which is precisely why *a plurality* of interpretations is needed. That is why I am so lacking in confidence when I say that the signs might seem to be pointing in a particular direction, and why I believe it is better to indulge that uncertainty. One thing that is clear is that Empedocles, and the ancients generally, were far more at home with and had a much better understanding of the forest than we do, and that their thinking may well include insights we will be hard pressed to keep up with. May these reflections on our experiencing of the forest serve for the time being only to let us see how *un*artificial this unfamiliar way of seeing, or intuiting, the forest is.

The second doubt hanging over our choice of topic, which some have already voiced, is why particularly wood, the forest, should be singled out. Why not also the meadow, the more so when there are studies on the links between the forest and the meadow? Or why not take as our topic water, earth, sky, the sea? Experiencing the sky or water is no less of an issue for us. We are captivated by the starry sky. Come to that, just about everything captivates us no less than the forest. The first answer is that the earth which Xenophanes saw as infinite, the water which Thales saw as the first principle, could have established themselves in philosophical thought as primal matter, *materia*, but did not.[13] The fact is that it was wood, *hyle*, the forest, that was adopted, and it is another question whether that came about before or after Aristotle. Perhaps it was an accident and came about simply because Aristotle, while lecturing, was looking for an example of what material *eidos*, form, is made of and took the nearest object to hand, which happened to be a wooden table. He had a concept for which he needed a name. The name reaches out towards the concept and acquires content. Content is the giving of form to the formless or, in this case, since wood is not formless, to something whose form is of no importance and can be used to provide a foundation for form that is of importance. Form puts its *imprint* on what it will, on a basis of matter: you can saw a piece of wood and form from it anything you like. This is a traditional and ostensibly philosophical commonplace, but we are about to say goodbye to it forever, because the much-vaunted *indefiniteness* of matter is going to prove to be its fundamental *indefinability*.

It is intriguing that the choice of wood to designate primal matter is at least partly due to a connectedness with the forest that we do not have with water, sky, or earth: that we seem, not so long ago in geological terms, to have been covered in vegetation but are so no longer. Something akin to deforestation has happened to us, and it is the destruction of the forests that is presently so alarming us on our planet.

Quite apart from whether the human species really is Desmond Morris's 'naked ape',[14] whether it ever was hairy and, if so, when it stopped being hairy, what is phenomenologically of value to us is that the experience of being hairy is simultaneously inaccessible to us and very close. We can readily imagine what it would be like to be hairy, although, if we imagine ourselves hairy, it is *ourselves* we are seeing as hairy, our real selves except, perhaps, for our consciousness.[15] The original hairy human's consciousness must surely have been different, *primal*, although the primitive mind was not necessarily crude and underdeveloped, something to be despised. On the contrary, we are curious and feel it is relevant to us. We can see that in the anthropology of Lévi-Strauss, in William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, and in all our scientific and artistic reconstructions.[16]

There is no need for us, in the interests of the integrity and reliability of our work, to start vexing ourselves over whether humans were ever hairy, or speculating about the nature of primitive consciousness. What is of significance for us, though, is the presence in the human experience of