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The Wood(s):¹

On the Problem of Living Matter in Ancient and Contemporary Biology

Introduction

The experience of the wood(s) as a substance that is devoured, burnt for the purpose of obtaining various kinds of energy, and formed has pre-determined the use of the corresponding term, *hylē*, as the designation of matter. The intermediate step in this coinage was the application of the term to ancient medicine, as well as biology. Through fantasies about the primeval, forest-dwelling, shaggy human; through the mythopoetics of the world tree; through the return, in our times, of the human masses separated from nature to the *Ersatz* of the woods in tobacco, wine, and narcotics—through all of this, the woods with their non-metric space (comparable to representations of the cell as a tropical forest) belong to the realities of contemporary humanity to a much greater extent than we tend to think. In the philosophical conceptions of *hylē*, or matter, in religion and theology (the cross as the world tree), and in poetry (the figures of a tree, a bush, a garden), the wood(s) reveal the incompletely understood intensity of their presence. We are surrounded by the wood(s) on all sides, very tightly, and what appears to be intimately our own, our thought, is not in a better position to free itself from them than our actual bodies. The wood(s) have always already managed to close in on us.

The periodically renewed attention, on the part of contemporary science, to the biological writings of Aristotle and his school is certainly justified. It is possible to verify that, in his biology, matter (*hylē*) is not opposed to *eidos*, whose real polarity is “lack.” The feminine material principle turns out to contain future development in all its fullness, and the so-called “self-generation of the living” in Aristotle needs to be linked to his attention to parthenogenesis. To *eidos*, understood as the masculine

¹ *Translator’s note:* The Russian word *лес*, like its Greek equivalent, means both a forest and timber, the woods and wood. Whenever both senses apply, I have translated it as “the wood(s).”

principle, is allotted the role of a historical goal-oriented sense of movement, supported in its dynamism by the material, feminine, and maternal principle.

Matter is one of the most difficult themes in Aristotle. The difficulties we encounter are of two kinds. First, having introduced a certain thesis, Aristotle does not commit himself either to remembering about it or to not postulating another one. And, second, for Aristotle himself, the difficulty is that prime matter must not be “such-and-such,” because, in that case, “another” matter will be conceivable and there will be two or more matters, whereas prime matter is only one. At the same time, Aristotle is determined neither to relegate matter beyond the limits of things nor to consider it separately from them. Just as there is no donkey-ness unless it is imagined to be outside this donkey right here, so matter is always *this one*.

In light of the contemporary trends in biological investigations, there is a growing interest in the ancient inclusion of the human in the ladder of living beings, be it in morphological, physiological, or ethical respects. The cosmic unity of everything living or, broadly still, of everything sentient (Tsiolkovsky, Vernadsky) problematizes the distinctions between living and nonliving matter. And, as a principle of directed change in the forms of the living, neo-Darwinism, too, requires further specification, given the facts of negative selection, non-stochastic development, or nomogenesis.

On the whole, in contrast to Darwinism, the evolutionary theory of Lev Semyonovich Berg fails to account for the gathering, concentrating, critical and crisis-ridden liminal moment in life. Berg allots a limited role to natural selection, responsible solely for the preservation of the *norm*. Whatever deviates from the norm is kept not in a trivial manner—that is, not in the sense that the status quo of the constant natural variation of types and deviations within the confines of a species is preserved—but so that, though each generation time and again exhibits tremendous variation, subjected to the test of fitness to live (i.e., with Darwinian selection), marginal elements leave the stage and the species inches toward the norm. Berg cites research on different generations of poppies: “every generation is a product of its *normal members* to a much greater degree than one could expect, based on the relatively high numbers of its individual representatives.” The same happens in human society: although, in every generation, there is a high distribution of deviants, who have, for instance, become alcoholics, the children of the next generation, on the whole, commence within the norm. If the number of unhealthy children increases, then the extent of this increase will be lesser than among adults; typically, children are more normal than the parents, and only very rarely are things the other way around. We should listen carefully to Berg’s thesis: in and of itself, natural selection does not change the norm, but accomplishes such a change only in conjunction with other factors.

It behooves us, also, to clarify the notions of perfectibility, adaptation, fitness, and survival. When Darwinism or selectionism evokes “the survival of the fittest,” we are dealing with a pleonasm, in that “the fittest” is understood, precisely, as that which is most capable of surviving. This awkwardness has been noted before. Here is one of those cases where a successful expression exists thanks to nothing but its own weight, so to speak. Essentially, “survival” and “the fittest” are not synonyms but, in some sense, opposites, and it would not be absurd to say that the miracle of life is that the fittest survive at all. Darwinism cannot be boiled down to a caricature of blindly wandering specimens, some of whom turn out to be the chosen ones. It is necessary to pay attention to the fact that this variety, this distribution, and the levels of possibility are *given*, or, in other words, that it is *not* the fittest that exist. In any case, one needn’t await the end of specimens’ or the species’ lives in order to conclude, based on the result, who is who. Already now, in current behavior, in every movement and countenance of the living, the contrast between the fittest and the others is evident.

As a rule, researchers naïvely judge success based on their own success, which usually refers to being healthy and well fed, as well as having progeny. But, clearly, criteria could be different. The living finds itself in a field of possibilities and choices, where the wager is not univocal. There are, as a matter of fact, at least two wagers—survival and fitness—with an over-determined relation and interdependence between them. Only a sheer absence of fitness will probably preclude survival. And, vice versa, the complete preservation by wild animals of their wildness, going back hundreds of thousands of years, has spelled out their extinction. When, after a nuclear disaster, only rats remain on the planet, their survival will also not mean that they are the fittest in the full sense of the word. Although one rarely reaches the level explication, remaining content with nothing but intuition, biologists would be surprised to know how frequently they rely on a demonstratively anti-positivist criterion in their assessment of fitness. Such a criterion does not require Konstantin Leontyev’s “blooming complexity,” but it also does not preclude observations extended in time and, above all, presupposes sympathy or co-feeling, rather than observations.

On the other hand, I could say that, within the economy of nature, one finds certain niches of fitness, namely those lucky places that attract to themselves and accommodate within themselves living forms. The very possibility of success in our world ought to be juxtaposed to the observation, made by physicists, that our part of the universe is “lucky” insofar as it exhibits a strict differentiation between energy and substance. With respect to this tending of the forms toward fitness, we do not see a stochastic distribution of more or less successful forms of behavior on a scale ranging from 0% to 100%. Technically, according to the mathematical theory of probability, this could be the case, but the living, as though from the outset, are predisposed to hitting the target.

In light of all this, I suggest to replace the Darwinian fitness, meaning adjustment, with the term goodness [*godnost*], which is situated in a lucky semantic neighborhood: the Russian *goditsya* (“to be suitable”), *po-goda* (the “weather”), *godovschina* (“anniversary,” “holiday”) fit here, as well as the Latvian *iegūt* (“to procure”) and *godu* (“honor”), the German *gut*, the English *good*, the Greek *agathon*, and so forth. The goodness of the living is not necessarily its adjustment to something; it can also be its holiday, or its honor. By interpreting fitness as goodness, one can refrain from entering the many debates that surround selectionism, natural selection, or Darwinism. Nothing prevents us from thinking that the distribution of possible forms of life, including behavioral forms, is indeed enormous and that those that are “good” appear *post factum*. It is only important not to miss the point that, *ante factum*, too, a certain “taste” for goodness—either immediately or after various trials-and-errors—determines or begins to determine the behavior of living beings, as the data of ethology corroborate. This taste for goodness is similar to such things as joy or a holiday, and it dictates behavioral patterns not content-wise, but at a purely formal level. In this regard, it is similar to a gesture, a shining appearance, or beauty. And it can turn out to be a hinge between the ancient and the contemporary conceptions of living matter.

Guided by the anticipation that a successful mode of comportment in our world is possible, we need not object to Darwinism (with its accidental trials) by presenting readymade forms full of content prepared by God, forms, into which living beings are, so to say, transformed. There are no previously prepared project-forms. Still, the absence of intermediate species in the range between the successful ones speaks in favor of the accommodating action of goodness that happens in advance of everything else. Darwin thought that intermediate forms had simply not been found yet. As he states in Chapter 9 of *The Origin of Species*: “The explanation lies, as I believe, in the extreme imperfection of the geological record” (Darwin 1859: 280). Today it has become nearly incontrovertible that intermediate forms have never existed. Nature can be compared to an artist, whose works have always found a place at an exhibition. “Nowhere does one find ugly forms, which would have necessarily cropped up, were limitless changeability to rule the day” (Berg 1922). The phenomenon, whereby life changes and leaves behind hundreds of millions of its forms in the history of the Earth, is still awaiting interpretation.

In natural sciences, the contemplation of life’s polarity finds a reflection in the oppositions between the processes of nourishment and reproduction, proteins and nucleic acids, symbiosis, inquilinism, parasitism, xenobiosis, the hypothesis of two lives, and “the tyranny of the gene.” A promising vista opens up in the consideration of a cell as an anthill, a colony of lower physiological units, given that all organisms are in their essence colonies and that life, in its fundamental tendency, is “sociogenic.” Everything living strives to the living, assimilates it or cooperates

with it (symbiosis, inquilinism, parasitism, xenobiosis). What prevails is not so much a struggle for existence as the organism's capacity to adjust, to find a compromise, to serve in the interests of unity and of other organisms in a kind of "egoistic altruism."

Myrmecology offers an opportunity for observing collective organisms, putting into perspective, on the one hand, the interaction of cells in an organism and, on the other, the functioning of communities of living beings, including humans. This discipline reveals the lawful character of various processes, which have received only a superficial treatment when studied inattentively. In the societies of ants one may discern different age groups, a calendar, castes and caste laws, goal-oriented organization, apprenticeship in caring for the body, communal education of the younger generation, cooperation, mutual care, division of labor, ethics, etiquette, dietary taboos, gift-giving, greetings, rituals of care for the body, hygiene, incest taboos, language, medicine, rituals of metamorphosis, honeymoon journeys, obedience to authority figures, military castes, surgery, manufacturing of weapons, trade, social visits, and meteorological services. A careful study of these phenomena allows us to explain the colony-like character of life.

Further, I propose to explore the theme of a living automaton in contrast to the mechanical one and of genetic programming in contrast to planning. I describe the distinguishing traits of a true (authentic) automaton, such as its ability to cope with the situations of crisis and to be in the states of extreme tension, uncertainty, and *amechania (aporia)*. At every level of existence of a true automaton, one discovers complexity, which cannot be exhausted through the contemporary methodologies of minute investigation, and an intricate tune-up—from the so-called unity of the genotype to the density of compression when it comes to the genetic programming of a large organism inscribed invisible cell structures.

Ethology, as the scientific study of animal behavior (expressed, for example, in nuptial rituals), allows for the approximation between the humanities and biology. It holds a tremendous potential for rehabilitating the ancient inclusion of human beings in the animal world and endows us with a new, sober attitude with which to approach the history and the developmental goals of life on earth.

The suggested analysis of geological, biological, and philosophico-historical knowledge about the history and the current situation of life on the planet specifies some positive ways, in which human theory and practice may participate in the movement of life. Such analyses belong not so much to the realm of global planning, as to the possibility of self-recognition, on the part of an isolated human being and humanity as a whole, as agents in the common orientation of the living toward success.

Chapter 1

In *The Beginnings of Christianity*, we have done everything in our power to show the most intimate, innermost core of faith. Still, a dangerous possibility persists, namely that faith will remain a conditioned, historical concept, a construct as in theological studies, whereas we are concerned with its *fundamental hermeneutics* or *phenomenology* in the sense of Husserl and Heidegger, or even with *grammar* in the sense of Wittgenstein (Bibikhin 2005). Even the slightest trace of this dangerous and unpleasant possibility can cause us to drown in theoretical constructions and lexical exercises and, thereby, fail to notice that we have plunged headfirst into an excess of concepts. To avoid such a situation, we will make a large step back, to the point where we have reached the certainty that we are staying only with first things and that there is nowhere else to retreat, since Moscow is behind us.

This expression, *Moscow is behind us*, was relevant—even if it was not voiced then—not only in 1941 but also in 1812. In that year, Moscow was captured and burnt down to the ground or incinerated on purpose. For the most part made of wood, it was constructed from the handiest, most intimately close material, especially at the time when dense woods were still preserved. In the city's burning, the Muscovites sensed something familiar and almost natural. According to Lev Tolstoy, it is to be expected than any abandoned settlement made of wood would burn to the ground.

What is our relation to the wood(s)? It continues to be intimate. Today, the pillar of smoke rising over Moscow emanates from the daily bonfire of 10,000 tons of oil, and, in the course of a decade, 30 million tons of oil will be burnt in this city alone. The provenance of the main source of fuel nowadays is organic, mainly derived from prehistoric *floating woods*, namely planktonic or freely floating *algae* that were found in abundance in the oceans between 500 million and 30 million years ago. We seek warmth, heat our houses, light up from this coal and oil bonfire, from its flashes in the cylinders and pistons of engines that move our machines, catch fish, plow our fields, harvest our crops, and deliver flour to the bakery.

Just as it did in ancient times, humanity is now also sitting around a bonfire, in which it burns around 5 million tons of fuel daily and over 15 billion over a decade, constantly taking care to add to it more oil and coal (just try not to maintain this fire!). Thousands of people who die every day because they have found themselves a little more distant from this bonfire serve as an obvious and persuasive reminder that this way of acting is an absolute necessity. The rest of humanity, which has had the time to find a place more or less near the bonfire, sometimes unwillingly glances back at them, and even if it does not glance back, it acutely feels this sweeping, gathering movement of dying of all those who have not found their spot by the bonfire. As a result, and with all the reason, humanity

cares, above all, about the maintenance of the blaze and the preparation of fuel.

There is a lot of talk about how humanity will discover other sources of *energy*. But, based on today's realities, the vast majority of our needs are being met like in ancient times thanks to the burning of the woods, though not of the woods that surround us (because these have been already exterminated) but of the distant ones, no longer in space but *in time*. Those are the woods that existed millions of years ago, when humanity still didn't exist, or when it already existed such that the woods were still *close* to it, not because humans lived in the woods, but because they were themselves *covered with vegetation*, that is, were *furry* or shaggy. The woods approached them so closely that they constituted their very skin, their very bodies. It was not so necessary or not at all obligatory to burn the wood(s), because what ensured the warmth of a human being were those woods (pelage or fur) that covered his body and were, at bottom, his body. Is this the only way of relating to the woods?

This intimacy of or to the woods has been, likely, carried over to the so-called primitive tribes that live in the forest and were unable to accept the cutting down of trees to such an extent that, even when they lost their societal structures and—let us suppose—joined the life of civilized society, they never became lumberjacks, did not work with chainsaws, did not drive Skidder forestry tractors, and so forth. For them, to touch the woods was like touching their own bodies, although science is not familiar with fur-covered people. A shaggy bigfoot, however, wanders about in the consciousness and folklore of contemporary humanity, somewhere very near; this creature is also not sitting by the bonfire, but is situated further away from it, albeit *otherwise* than those hapless people, who would have liked to have sat next to it but did not get a spot.

Just as a contemporary human is *almost hairless*, so today's Earth has fewer and fewer woods. Probably, in order to maintain the energy of the bonfire, around which humanity is seated, the visible woods are less important than those invisible ones, dating back to half a billion years old, which are now so present in the form of voraciously sought after oil and coal. But isn't there still another, perhaps closer and more touching presence of the woods in the method or mode of our existence? Indeed, there is, and, immediately, several doors open before us. For now, let's peek into them, choosing which one to enter. It's as though we are in a labyrinth.

With respect to the bonfire of the burning woods: In his most recent, still unpublished works, Andrey Valentinovich Lebedev deals, among other things, with the etymology of the word "wood(s)" in ancient Greek, and he is convinced that it points in the direction of a bonfire, burning, a blaze. Just as, etymologically, grass [*trava*] is something *for pasture* [*na potravu*], for the feeding of cattle, so *the wood(s)* is etymologically something burnable, burning. This etymology is still questionable; let us leave it for later and peek at another clearing, chosen by chance.

Among other sources of energy—besides the current, already burnt, and the ancient, apparently already half-burnt, woods—atomic energy is endowed with real significance. Atomic energy may be also roughly represented as a product of burning—but of what? It is difficult to talk about it, because even the most specialized knowledge will be of little use, due to certain scientifically unresolved problems. We can imagine an atomic reaction as a burning, a blaze, or an explosion, a quick fire or a slow smoldering. At least, this view is quite customary. But *of what* is it a fire? What burns in an autogenic reaction are the elements, oxygen and hydrogen. They join one another, form a molecule of substance (namely, water) and cease to exist in and of themselves, while remaining within the composition of water. In the case of a thermonuclear reaction, the elements of uranium, plutonium, and hydrogen are used, but something happens to these elements that has to do not with changes in substance but with a transformation in *matter*: the transmutation of *matter*—that is to say, neither of wood, nor of oil, nor of coal, nor of other combinations of elements, but of *matter itself*—into energy. Would it be possible, would it be correct, to say that in a thermonuclear reaction what burns is *matter itself*?

Strangely enough, the original sense of the word “matter” is *the wood(s)*.

The word *matter* is derived from Latin, and its first signification is “primary matter,” *materia prima*, as evident in Cicero’s “world matter” from which everything arises and in which everything exists, *materia rerum ex qua et in qua sunt omnia*. This Latin philosophical term translates the Greek philosophical concept *hylē*, the original meaning of which is *the wood(s)*. It is quite possible that the official, technical meaning of matter in Latin, as much as nowadays in Russian, has become predominant only within a state-sanctioned culture, whereas popular culture preserved another sense of matter, later on displaced by philosophical language, namely, of matter as materials and, in the first place, *burnable* materials, and, again above all, *lumber*, that is, *wood*. In Latin, “to fell trees” is *materiam caedere*. In one of Romance languages,² this is still the meaning of the word, which now sounds as *madeira*, or *wood*.

In atomic energy, in a thermonuclear reaction, therefore, what burns is, once again, *the wood(s)*, if we refrain from using foreign terms or translate them into our language.

Quite suddenly, our own philosophical language tells us that, to obtain the new and seemingly promising thermonuclear energy, we burn the same thing—*the wood(s)*. World substance is like the wood(s). In the face of this strange conclusion, we should refrain from deciding that some sense of the word, “a plot of land covered with vegetation,” or “lumber,” is

² *Translator’s note*: i.e., in Portuguese.

primary, while the other, philosophical signification is derivative and secondary. Generally speaking, language does not come into being by merely adding up semantic pluralities. Its provenance is as deep as that of a dream. In the word *the wood(s)*, it points toward a tree, fuel, world substance. Let us, then, not rush with sorting out which sense is original, and which one is derivative. Wasn't the philosophical use of *matter* not a departure from the ordinary wood, but a return to it? But, at this point, it is as though we are still wandering in the woods; having barely entered them, we've gotten lost.

We will approach the woods from another side, or, rather, their other side has been present in us for a long time, and it is worth paying attention to it. Comparisons of the Earth with a living being have a long history. In Europe, they have been most clearly and fully developed by Leonadro da Vinci, whom we will have to read in more detail later on. The woods of the Earth, in these comparisons, correspond to the vegetal covering on the body of a living being. He refers to this more than once, for example in the following context:

...potrei dire, la terra avere anima vegetativa, e che la sua carne sia la terra; li sua ossi sieno li ordini delle sollevazione de' sassi, di che si compongono le montagne; il suo sangue sono le vene delle acque; il lago del sangue, che sta di torno al core, è il mare oceano: il suo alitare è 'l crescere e 'l decrescere del sangue e 'l caldo dell'anima del mondo è il foco, ch'e infuso per la terra...
(Codex Hammer ch. 34).⁵

Now vegetation does not cover the human body in its entirety—I say *now* conditionally, because it is better to keep away from the hypothesis of the shagginess of the early human. Even the theory of evolution does require such shagginess, because there are furless animals, for instance, elephants. For us, from a phenomenological point of view, it is important not to determine whether the early human was shaggy but to *take note* of something: in our knowledge, our consciousness, myth, fantasy (such as Lewis's good-old primitive shaggy human) we sense a stable and near presence of the bigfoot, or a shaggy anthropoid, or a baby, born with fur, a *caesar, caesariatus*. The thought that a human can be shaggy does not leave us indifferent. It is either something scary, like the shaggy spirits of the woods [*leshnye*], or something evocative of happiness, like the *caesariatus*.

⁵ “We could say that the Earth possesses a vegetative soul, and that its flesh is the earth; its bones are the levels of stony elevations, from which mountains are made; its blood are the watery veins; the lake of blood, which is situated around the heart is the ocean; its agitation is the rises and falls of blood [...] and the heat of the world soul is the fire that suffuses the earth.”

It is a matter of fact, rather than a hypothesis, that hair covers clearly delineated areas of the [human] body, and, above all, the head, that is to say, the mind. If a human being is in the first place the mind, then the hair [kosmy], the cosmos on the head, demarcates precisely that which for humans is a marker of the genus, that which is the most essential. The hair [kosmy] on a human head is a sort of *microcosm*. The beard is also clearly marked: men have it, while women don't, which means that it, too, by a method that remains questionable, indicates gender. Science tells us that gender, the existence of androgens, is linked to the growth of hair on the chest. Hair growing in the armpits indicates a weak, residual role of scent in the life of the species.

In folklore, mythology, and poetry, hair growing on the part of the human body, which directly serves the continuation of the species, is called a grove, a forest, or a meadow in the woods. In a 1994 article, Andrey Lebedev (Lebedev 1994) analyzes a passage from the tractate of Hippolytus (before 170–235) about the Naassenes, in the context of his magnum opus *The Refutation of All Heresies* (Refutatio Omnium Heresiarum, 1986, V 8. 43: 164, 225, 231). Naassenes, in Hebrew, are the same as the ophytes. In the second century, there were a variety of interpretations that agreed amongst themselves on the idea that Jehovah created nothing more than the material world, finite and deceptive, and that humans would have been bogged down and wandered eternally in this world, were it not for the revelations of the snake, οφίς, about which the first book of the Mosaic Pentateuch (Genesis 3:1) relates that it opened human eyes to the abyss of the spiritual, through the distinction between good and evil. Otherwise, humans would have continued to float in the sea of materiality. To be sure, the snake did not show the path, which is why Christ came and brought light to the material world. In his counter-arguments, Hippolytus revisits old teachings about mythical emanations. These proceed, by the way, through the paths of Aphrodite and Persephone.

It seems to me on an intuitive level—one cannot speak otherwise before the publication of the new etymologies of the wood(s) by Lebedev—that the wood(s) conceived as a blaze leads us there where it is important and necessary to think. In another article, while agreeing with the attribution of the fragment about the sacred grove of Aphrodite to Empedocles, I would have opposed Lebedev's approach, which leads, in my view, to a dead-end, when it drives a wedge between the physiological, embryological, or anthropogenic realities and philosophico-poetic metaphor. In particular, Lebedev thinks that scientific positivity requires a sober gaze and concludes that, speaking of the meadows and groves of Aphrodite, Empedocles “describes metaphorically the female genitals.”

A long-standing and would-be objective scientific distinction between bodily realities and poetry is, actually, neither simple nor factually accurate: in and of itself, it was initially accompanied by a complex scientific mythology, committed to what one can *supposedly* grasp with one's

hands, which excluded the poetic. The illusion that whatever is scientific, or technical, can be grasped with one's hands awakens only as a result of a certain degree of blindness one permits oneself. We will not allow ourselves to fall prey of such blindness: the embrace of the earth and of the world by science and technology has, as a matter of fact, not embraced anything; appropriation is conditional; the euphoria of scientific success is not at all different from the joy of Lev Tolstoy's character, a three-year-old girl, who, having set herself alight in a wooden house, invited her still younger brother: "Come! See the oven I have prepared!" Everything will return to the so-called *poetic*, to the "soft power of thought and poetry."⁴

The meadow and the sacred grove, the woods in folklore, mythology, poetry, and philosophy are, by far, not metaphors of purportedly linear and flat realities. We *first* understand the wood(s) industrially and aesthetically, and then do not find another method for understanding the grove of Aphrodite, except as a metaphor or perhaps also as a euphemism, as though tactically clothing the nakedness of a beautiful word, which arouses shame. Art is capable of showing nakedness, such that the latter is neither a metaphor nor physiology. Is an intimate word capable of the same? It is, and it does so, as in the case of "grove" and "meadow," *ἄλσος* and *λεμιών*, between which, according to Lebedev, as well as the authors he refers to, there is a "close association [...] in sacral contexts." For Empedocles, a "grove" is not a metaphor of Aphrodite, because, as Lebedev himself mentions, for the Greek author, the earth is a womb of the human. And, again, Lebedev himself recalls the enthusiastic idolization of Aphrodite by Empedocles. A grove, or a meadow, of Aphrodite does not send us back to a "meaning that refers to biology," so that *alsos* is not "a metaphor for the reproductive organs in general conceived as a 'holy precinct' with a walled temple-uterus inside." Rather, quite to the contrary, a biological reference, to the extent that it enters the field of vision at all, sends us back to wood or to the woods as that which is primary, as matter, as a *mother*. In his turn, Lebedev speaks of the sacred Temple of Nature in pre-Platonic thought, with its innermost mystery of fetus formation. Therein is the intersection of the mystery of life and the mystery of nature, a mystery hidden from the eyes of the crowd, though not from the mindful gaze of the philosopher, who follows the path of mystical initiation. I will read in its entirety the marvelous conclusion of this article, which, as is often the case in Lebedev, opens more distant horizons than those of the primitive positivism I have identified:

⁴ "Der Dichter (René Char) [...] sagte mir, die Entwurzelung des Menschen, die da vor sich geht, ist das Ende, wenn nicht noch einmal Denken und Dichten zur gewaltlosen Macht gelangen" (Martin Heidegger, "Der Spiegel Interview, 1966" in (Heidegger 2000). Translation: "The poet (René Char) [...] told me that the destruction of human roots, happening now, is the end, if only thinking and poetry do not assume their nonviolent power."

The Wood(s)...

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 ἱερὸν*: the formation of 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 initiation. The metaphorical complex of secret knowledge is well attested in Periphyseos. 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 (Lebedev 1994).

In our new theme of the wood(s), we will also find it difficult not to go along with the mass of the *polloi*, so we'd better be more careful.

Perhaps the first objection, which we already foresee and which should and must be retorted is the following: Whether scientific positivism is secondary or not (most likely, it is indeed secondary and derivative), it is habitual, whereas in order to see a grove, or the woods, as something sacred and mysterious, one needs to adopt an artificial, specially prepared manner of looking.—But it seems that the seeing of the woods otherwise than economically or aesthetically does not require preparation, even if it is quite rare and is *covered over by* that very “habituality.” They say that one can lose one's way in the woods; or else: “to get lost among three pine trees”; or, again: “as though in a dark forest,” that is to say, having lost one's orientation. It appears that the explanation for this, namely for the fact that in the woods visibility is poor and familiar markers of orientation are nowhere to be seen, is nevertheless already a rationalization of an experience many have probably had in different forms. The woods take us outside of metric space, which is what the presence of trees, or our being among trees, instills in us, making us fall asleep (here, the lexicon can be quite varied, and it must be so due to the strangeness of the experience, which, precisely, does not lend itself to being described). What the woods say—by the way, another method for imparting this experience is indicated in the expression “talking trees”—is that humans get lost, lose their orientation, and not only of a geographical kind.

Running ahead of myself, I will mention another method of talking about this persuasive quality of the woods. They say that it acts as a narcotic, whether weak or strong, depending on the particularities of experi-

ence. This potency of the woods may also be frightening, and I will refer to a literary example, to which we shall return, namely the “nausea”—or, more precisely, queasiness, as on high seas—sensed by the narrator in Sartre’s *Nausea*, when he is next to a tree, the bark of a tree. This experience of a tree in the novel—or, to take another haphazard example, in Vasily Belov’s writings, where cutting down a big pine causes a sacred feeling in the lumberjack, or in other instances that I cannot relate, because a similar experience of meeting the woods has, in its own way, been felt by everyone—is not at all artificially induced or planned for. On the contrary, it is sudden and surprising, and its unfamiliarity is only due to its being covered over by the habit of, as I have said, an economico-aesthetic seeing of the woods. It still behooves us to ask how this habit was formed, but we will not occupy ourselves with this question, because it seems that the most interesting part of this habit is exactly that it is somehow unsure of itself, always ready to step aside, to give place to the surprising and wondrous experience of the woods.

A constant feature of this experience is intimacy, even when it frightens, as in Sartre or in the figure of the spirit of the woods. The fear that grips us in the woods is not of the type that can be assuaged by technological means, because it is too intimately our own. It is as though the spirit of the woods is within ourselves; in their guise, we are afraid of ourselves, other to ourselves, altered. And when the influence of the wood is desirable, when it is sought, then it is also felt as something very close and *homely*.

Our experience of the woods seems to point in the direction of the mysteries of the sacred grove, through which the initiation into mysticism begins. Here, it is still not necessary for us to decide what interpretations are better—the philosophical or the gnostic ones. It is clear, at any rate, that any interpretation will lag behind and lose its way, which is exactly why interpretations will be required and will be *diverse*. With this uncertainty I, too, must speak, *as though* the indicators are turned in a certain direction. It is much better to keep this uncertainty, since Empedocles and the ancients in general have inhabited and thought through the woods incomparably better than we do, and, on their turf, thought can reach sudden insights, with which we will not be able to catch up.—Let this entire remark about the experience of the woods, *for now*, serve us only for the purpose of understanding how non-artificial the non-habitual mode of seeing or hearing the woods is.

The second misgiving with our theme, already expressed by some, goes something like this: Why would you accentuate the woods, and not, for instance, a meadow, seeing that there are studies of the connection between the two? Why not transform water, the earth, the sky, or the sea, into the main theme? The experience of the sky, or of water, does not touch us less; a starry sky fascinates; and, indeed, everything touches the human no less than the woods. My initial response: the endless earth of

Xenophanes, or the world liquid of Thales, could have stayed in philosophical thought as primary substances, as matter. But they did not. What remained was *the wood(s)*—and it's quite another issue whether this happened after Aristotle or before—as the term for primary substance. This occurred incidentally, simply because the lecturer Aristotle, seeking an example of that from which *eidos* was made, on the basis of what it was actualized, encountered, ready to hand, the closest example, namely a wooden table. His conception was in need of a term, since the term strives toward the concept, from which it receives its content. The content of the concept is supposedly: giving form to the formless, or—in this case, seeing that wood is not formless—to that which is not interested in its form and is ready to lie at the feet of the required form. The form, in turn, imprints itself *from above* on whatever it pleases, on matter; it is possible to cut anything whatsoever out of a piece of wood. We will have to part once and for all with this habitual, pseudo-philosophical commonplace. The famous undetermined nature of matter will turn out to be a principled *indefiniteness*.

The mystery and the task [*zagadka i zadacha*] will, simultaneously, reside in the choice of the wood(s) as a designation of primary substance. Such privileging is explicable, among other things, with respect to our connection precisely with the woods—not with water and not with the sky, or the earth. We are linked to the woods through a unique intrigue, according to which we probably have been (and maybe not so long ago, in geological terms) shaggy, and now are not. Something happened to us, in connection with our vegetation, and what happened to us is the very deforestation, the destruction of the woods, which causes us anxiety on the Earth, on the planet.

Regardless of whether human being is really Morris's naked ape,⁵ whether he was once shaggy and when he ceased to be so (if he ceased to be), it is phenomenologically important to us that the experience of shagginess is at the same time inaccessible and close. A thought experiment with our shagginess can be undertaken,⁶ but, seeing ourselves covered in fur, we still see *ourselves* covered in fur, that is, we essentially remain ourselves, except... except *consciousness*. A shaggy human should have had

⁵ In 1967, psychologist and TV personality, Desmond Morris published *The Naked Ape: A Zoologist's Study of the Human Animal*.

⁶ The notion that we only have an experience of the contemporary, naked and clothed, human and do not have that of a shaggy and unclothed one is incorrect. The experience of a shaggy body is strangely familiar to us, if only because all our newborns have a very blurry boundary between the forehead and the hair on the head. Hair-cover recedes from the forehead only after birth. Shagginess is also starkly present in the sharp sense of shame that we are naked, and this shame is a characteristic that is so pervasive and necessary that Vladimir Solovyov built on it—on this shame—his entire ethics.

a different consciousness, one that is primeval. And, again, a primeval consciousness need not be rough, primitive, or underdeveloped; on the contrary, in our construction of it, it is interesting and it touches us. So it is in the anthropology of Levi-Strauss, in Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, and in all scientific and literary reconstructions.

For the accomplishment of our work, it is *absolutely* unnecessary to inquire either into whether humans have even been shaggy nor into the nature of primeval consciousness. What concerns us is the presence in human experience (of the so-called primitive tribes), in thought (as in that of Jean-Jacques Rousseau), in art, in mass culture (for instance, in Lewis, who with great ease sees a kind shaggy proto-human and a wise super-human; or in the bigfoot of a recent American film, adapted from Lewis) of *the other* human, who, despite its proximity to us, is more of the woods than we are, thanks to his shagginess, thanks to a principled refusal to cut down trees (as it has been noted, even members of the dying out, declassified tribes will never work as, say, lumberjacks), and thanks to life in the woods.

The contemporary city-dwelling and technologically savvy human does not let the woods come too close to himself, measures their charms in harmless doses: to observe the landscape, to walk in a park... But the woods, exactly because they are pushed away, eat into the human all the more irresistibly and aggressively. I could say that humanity has not sort-ed out [*ne razobralo*, also “has not analyzed”] its relation to the woods, and a quarrel [*razborka*, also “analysis”] begins. I am not seeing anything wrong in the opinion that tobacco, wine, and narcotics are the revenge of the woods, with the firm grip its juices, poisons and smoke have on the human. The contemporary city cannot leave the woods behind; the woods catch up with it in the power of wine, tobacco, and cocaine. Ancient religions, ancient civilizations, are not a part of the bygone past so long as there are cocaine, tobacco, and wine. In cocaine, a human being ceases artificially to ward himself off from the outside, lends himself to the element, the woods, shamanism, fire. Of course, this is an already desperate throwing oneself into the blaze, but it is provoked as though by a long accumulated history of an artificial separation from the woods. From their *matter*.

Once again: for the sake of sobriety, it is advisable to refrain from a Lewis-type reconstruction of the shaggy human. We are dealing only with that which exists now, comprising our phenomenology. Whether we are afraid of the shaggy human or are attracted to him, on the hither side of this assessment, *the other* we are present here and now in boredom or in disgust—we with *another consciousness*, which it is impossible to imagine, construct, or calculate, but with which, strangely enough, it is possible to conduct thought experiments.

What kind of *faith* does this human have? “A primitive one.” “The same one as described by Michel Foucault in the case of a child, a mad-

man, or a poet.” Answers like these, whereby we say, at once, much more than sobriety permits us and more than is required, are plentiful. Responding to this question, it is again better to behave as good phenomenologists do, describing what is here and now.

Here is one outcome of all this. Suppose, that we are dealing with a believer; he frequents the temple and professes his faith. Can he, too, observe in himself *another* faith? Am I inviting everyone to see and realize that we all live with two faiths [*dvoeverie*]? Once more, everything is much simpler than that. Just as, even though we do not know how to take leave of the consciousness in which we rotate, we easily feel the other (namely, the human of the woods with primeval consciousness, which is other not at the level of content) close to ourselves, so we feel the possibility of a faith, which is different not only in its content. The Fathers of the Church believe that the Church originates with Abel. Catholic theologian Bernhard Welte has always associated the biblical Abel with the inhabitants of the volcanic caves in Ölberg, near Köln, who lived 10,000 years ago. Can we know anything about their worship of God? Bernhard Welte felt a Eucharistic communion with those cave dwellers. How is this possible, if they had a different faith? Or, can one speak of a faith, which is one and the same in us and in cave people, who lived 10,000 years ago?

St. Paul asks us to understand the sacrifice of Abel in terms of unshakable faith (Lett. Jews 11, 4); Saint John Chrysostom, in his interpretation of the fourth chapter in the Book of Genesis, speaks of the faithful disposition of Abel’s heart, compared to the mindlessness of Cain. Cain’s countenance fell, because his gift was rejected.

And the Lord said to Cain: Why are you angry? And why has your countenance fallen? If you do well, will not your countenance be lifted up? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door; and its desire is for you, but you must master it (Genesis 4: 6–7).

The issue is no longer a sacrificial offering, but something much broader; it has to do with any action, which may be a kind one, prompting the actor to lift his countenance and God to glance at it in return, or the movement of the heart may be crooked, which is when a human being becomes less transparent, hesitant, his eyes glance down, he is stricken with loneliness, is cursed. It depends on the person whether he wants for himself an open faith, fearing a fallen countenance, or suppresses this fear in himself, as Cain did before his anger and envy, *having let go of, having neglected* [*otpushil, upustil*] his concern for what commentators call “an inner disposition.”

This concern about keeping one’s part, staying with God, not falling from His grace (or, if one has already fallen, then the anxiety of this fallenness or irritation and envy), this measured movement between the state of a lifted countenance and an open gaze, on the one hand, and

a different state, that of being lowered, on the other—without all this, it is impossible to imagine the human, be it a child or the shaggy one. We know both the child and the simplest human being—perhaps, these two above all—as standing before a constant choice, in a constant concern about their part and about being hapless; between Cain, who is not needed, and Abel, who gaily lifts his eyes and encounters the gaze of God.

At this point, I will introduce a word, which I almost did not have, namely *the law* of the human or of human nature. This law is unconditional, first, and unique, because, in the rest of his affairs, the human is indeterminate and free. For every human, however he defines his faith, in any condition, state, and age, this law is the concern for one's part, concern in the Heideggerian sense of *Sorge*, one's part in the sense of an endowment, rather than dispossession; riches, rather than destitution; and, if destitution, then strict poverty, better than any wealth.

We are utterly unable to read, to unfurl this law of concern, of *εὐλάβεια*, of a good grasp, careful fearfulness, or being God-fearing. Most likely, it operates before any definition on our part and, before we realize it, dictates our actions. Everything we do, we do in obedience to this law. Is it active even in the privative form of non-following? No, it only seems that one can oppose it; its cancelling or weakening cannot happen, but the mechanism of Cain can chime in under the slogan, "the worse it is, the better." Our freedom does not extend here beyond the possibility of being present or not being present there where we, in any case, already are. It is only through this level of the universal law of human nature that one can interpret religion.

Religion will turn out to be (within its culture, language, and way of life) the restoration of the unwritten law, of instinct. That is why, in its essence, religion is this very law. And, conversely, every religious discourse will be only secondary.

The instinct of piety, the choice of Abel, and the danger of Cain are the inherent law. It is imperative to restate to the word *law* this meaning. The separation of civil and religious laws, of civil and canonical right, is necessary in order to maintain the inviolability of originary law. The two parallel laws, the secular and the divine, are the complementary methods for grasping that which is difficult to the point of the impossibility of formulating it. On the other hand, *sharia* and Christian Orthodox Palamism wish to be the direct expressions of a single law, and so risk all the more.

In yet another thought experiment, I do not sense that, even in their forest-dwelling shaggy condition, humans could not be formed or created by the law, of which I am speaking. It preserves humanity. *The law as binding at any time.*

The etymology of the word *religion* invokes, it seems to me, attention, concern, piety, which was formerly called *the law*. We will now re-

store this old word, the first meaning of which was (still relatively recently, three hundred years ago), “faith, a profession of faith.”

Why do we speak so formally, leaving the content out, when we call “human law,” *εὐλάβεια*, a careful and attentive grasp? Because the human is open, his nature is free, and because that with which humans deal before anything else, in themselves and on the earth, is the indeterminable, the wood(s). Indeterminable and unknowable, the abyss of the woods passes into tobacco (you might recall the ritual tobacco of native Americans, which was much stronger than ours).

The law we are discussing here will still need to be compared to Kant’s categorical imperative.

I repeat that, for a human, there are no other laws, because he is before the substance, in which he drowns. Matter as the power of the wood(s), the force of its substance, the smoke of tobacco, the wine of Bacchus, narcotics, inebriation, ecstasy. The wood(s), matter, from which everything arouse, is akin not to the timber of a carpenter but to passion, gender, the grove of Aphrodite, the smoke and spirit of tobacco, the inebriation of Bacchus and Dionysis, the poison of cocaine. The wood(s), then, is a blaze, the fire of passion. When Aristotle called primary substance “the wood(s),” he envisioned this kind of wood(s). We will still see for ourselves.

Chapter 6

We are invited to distinguish two things: the underlying and the opposing, *ὑποκείμενον* and *ἀντικείμενον*. —But why, the heck, should we distinguish them? Such is the question—and the rougher it is posed, the better. Why do we do anything at all? God knows; we are always doing something. Something. *What* are you doing? — I am learning; I am doing this *what*, learning. Since I am doing it, this *what*, what I am doing, is not yet. Does this mean that I am doing, or making, my *what* out of nothing? No, not out of nothing; it is God who creates out of nothing. So, out of what am I doing, or making, my *what*? Out of some other *what*. Learning is light, while the lack of learning is darkness.⁷ *Per aspera ad astra*,⁸ and we—all of Russia—are overcoming our backwardness by learning.

In the midst of our feverish rush, we are stopped in our tracks, right now, by Aristotle. If you—or anyone, or all of Russia—were not learning; if you did not have this idea in your heads, then your un-educatedness would not have existed, either. You are all obsessed by the idea of learning, precisely because it falls to you to overcome the darkness of igno-

⁷ *Translator’s note:* This is a literal translation of the Russian proverb, whose English equivalent is: “Learning is the eye of the mind.”

⁸ Translation: “through the thorns, toward the stars.”

rance. And you will eternally be overcoming it, for, if it existed before learning, then the learning will only displace it without doing away with it. Ignorance will remain forever. You have confused two things: the opposed and the underlying. In op-position to learning, you, yourselves, have posited learning: before learning there was no ignorance, and it will not exist after learning. *The real* underlying factor—which was before learning, which remains in the process of learning, and will remain after it—is human matter, the human wood(s). It is the under-lying both of ignorance and of culture, that is to say, it is *equally* the basis of the one and the other. Somehow, the woods can be, at the same time, foreign (as they say: scary, dark, dense) and familiar (good or bad). The Russian word *zdorovyi*, “healthy,” etymologically means “made of good wood, or good woods.”⁹ It allows us to see the “human materials,” so to speak.

Before reading the important end of Book 2 of *Physics* (7–9), observe that, based on Aristotle’s description of his method at the outset of *Physics*, he (unlike, say, Euclid) will never *ask* us to do something. Instead, he will take note of what we have not yet noticed ourselves, even though it should have been noticed before all else. This is a more originary phenomenology than that of Husserl. Heidegger’s pure phenomenology is a clear and purposeful return from Husserl to Aristotle. I recall how Chanyshv¹⁰ looked at me in surprise, when I called Heidegger the most faithful interpreter of Aristotle. He should have, rather, directed his sense of surprise to the following: one of the earliest courses given by Heidegger, in the winter semester of 1921–1922 is titled *The Phenomenological Interpretations of Aristotle* (Heidegger 1985). It contains *none* of the habitual accounts of Aristotle. Still in its raw form, the entire landscape of *Being and Time*, life and the world, care, event, and attunement appears here, when, say, *Leben* stands in the place of *Dasein*, and, immediately, with the equal sign, is inscribed in the formula *Leben = Sein*. It further turns out that the structure of care, as the slippage of what is one’s own, is, apparently, Aristotle’s “movement,” set in the context of de-distancing, the removal of distance, and finally the fallenness of *Dasein*. Since, even to me, at the first thoughtless leafing through the Heidegger seminar, it appeared that the young *Privatdozent* went astray, sliding from the announced theme into one that is his own, then the same impression will surely be shared by many others. For not everyone will have the time to look into the text and to discern that this is *the only real* Aristotle (Bibikhin 2009a).

⁹ *Translator’s note:* The Russian word *zdorovyi*, “healthy,” shares the root letters *d-r-v* with *derevo*, “tree.”

¹⁰ Arsenyi Nikolaevich Chanyshv (1926–2005) was a professor and a doctor of the philosophical sciences. Since 1955, he was a part of the philosophical faculty of Moscow State University (MGU), at the department of the history of foreign philosophy.

Aristotle's introduction of the notion of the wood(s) is linked to Aristotle's return to phenomenology (this is not a slip of tongue on my part). Wherever we stop in order to pay attention, there *ap-pears* so much of everything that there is neither the time nor the space left for constructions. Amidst such wealth, why introduce some private artifices? They are laughable and unnecessary. *There is so much of everything* is still a very weak way of putting it; it would be better to say that everything is *ever inexhaustible*, because underneath whatever we take hold of, in the "under-lying," there will be "that out of which."

Gathered in ὄλη is the common, first experience of every formation/education [*obrazovanie*]: we form, build, draw, educate, and so our "technique," in the broad sense of the word, is occupied with the same as nature. Out of what? We look around, in search of the materials. For an educator, the materials are the students, but a teacher does not accept just any student with the same enthusiasm. It is different with every one. Plato calls matter a *container*, a receptacle, mother. Does she / it contain everything indifferently? Probably not. But does the pre-found givenness [*pred-nakhodimaya dannost'*], the under-lying, our wood(s), dictate how to comport oneself? Everything—including experience, intuition, and various authorities—tells us that the answer is "no."

Hence, we have a negative acquisition on our hands, which is also an outcome, like all the others. *On the right*, it is forbidden to think that the idea, *eidos*, intention, or form expects only persistence from us, so that we would "realize" it. Nothing will come out of this, unless we pay attention to matter, the primeval wood(s). In other words, it is wrong to assert, as I have recently heard in a talk of one well-meaning Italian, that "spirit masters matter." Spirit will never master the under-lying; the latter will keep lying-under, just as it has always lain. At most, spirit will master its opposite, spiritlessness. But matter, which is indeterminate, is no less spirituality than it is spiritlessness. *On the left*, it is forbidden to think that it would be necessary to await the under-lying—to wait for the moment when it would start speaking within us. So, elsewhere, I have cited the diary of a certain drunkard (Bibikhin 2009b: 142). "There is no clarity," he stated, and retreated still deeper into the woods. "There is still no clarity," he stated again, and again drank, until he had no strength to state anything whatsoever. There are prohibitions on the right and on the left, and we can go neither here nor there. This means that everything is in good order: we are in an a-poria, without an exit, which means that we are exactly there where we should be.

By the way, the other dimension of *the same* situation is the absence of reference points, of the abscissa and the ordinate, in the writing of Aristotle. Unfortunately [...], those working on the history of philosophy are occupied, for the most part, with an unnecessary and harmful task of proposing these points of reference that are, of course, illusory, because diverse—and seemingly understandable— notions are taken as support

structures. The Aristotelian scene changes with every shift in aspect, or type. And shifts in aspects, or in *doxa*, as we learn from Wittgenstein or from Plato, will never cease. Such is a true, i.e., a spontaneous, automaton, like the statue of Daedalus.

I hope that those who have read *Physics*, have not immediately started with II 7 and have not skipped over the beginning, containing methodological remarks. The point of writing that “scientific knowledge derives from the knowledge of causes, to which we shall turn in physics” (Aristotle 1961: I.1), is to make a decisive gesture, like that of shutting a door: that’s enough! Physicists only confuse everything, imagining their knowledge to be the first, the originary; in reality, they do not deal with the groundless, with the abyss, with mystery, and, instead, are bogged down in causal chains. The true first philosophy is, in any case, meta-physics. To make the physicists sober up (even if certain metaphysical insights are woven into their works), one must consider and call their science “causal-effectual,” hence, a kind of mechanics. To shut before the physicists the door, leading to metaphysics. The beginning of *Physics* is, then, [addressed to the physicists]: it is your own fault; there, get exactly what you have always slipped towards—not mere looking, a pure phenomenology, as in metaphysics, but a teaching about causes, principles, and elements.

Further, in the same first chapter of the first book, Aristotle continues, in the same angry tone, to elaborate on the same thought: So, what did you want? To begin with divine knowledge? No one can begin from anywhere else but from one’s own knowledge. That is what we need the sciences and methods for, namely to break through our current knowledge, which is the closest to us now, toward how everything is “by nature.”

This sober reflection—that we have what we have and that we hold onto nothing else—brings to a naught the rather stupid debates over what we should rely on, be it *doxa* or true knowledge, or whether Parmenides’ relation to *doxa* is positive or negative. Needless to say, this relation is positive; true knowledge might be something very good, but we have no choice, because we do not dispose of anything but the ever-changing *doxa*. Good or bad, there is nothing we can use as a point of departure except for it, while true knowledge is given to us as a *doxa* about true knowledge, as one of its aspects.

In continuation, Aristotle indicates what I have already noted without referencing him: our vision is such that we first grasp *the wholes*, or unities. Whether this is good or bad is a superfluous question. That is how things are, and there is nothing to discuss. Just tell me if someone succeeds in seeing or hearing what is *not* whole, non-unitary. We can say with certainty that this is a characteristic of the human eye, because, since the earliest age, human children cannot look otherwise than by extracting large wholes from the world. For example, with one word, they designate the flight and everything that flies, from a mosquito to an airplane. The expression “two-four” represents everything countable, numbers, repeat-

able objects such as the stairs, money and *all official documents and forms*, in which children also intuit counting and accounting.

In such child's vision, there is enchantment and genius. If one succeeds in preserving it, then archetypal vision, like that of Goethe or Dante, emerges.

We sense that around five years of age (a time in one's life, which, according to Freud corresponds to ancient humanity) a major break takes place, and this intuition provides us with yet another clear proof. Without changing, holistic, beautiful, fascinating child's vision suddenly gets spoiled, cracks up. "In the beginning," *πρώτον*—and it is unimportant for how long; what matters is that this is how it is *in the beginning*—, a really young child calls all men *daddy* and all women *mommy*. "Subsequently, this child discerns each one out of them," and, again, it is unimportant when; the crucial point is that the early wholeness falls apart and, indeed, must fall apart.

This example of Aristotle (Aristotle 1961: I.1) is sharp—true Attic salt. It is as though a soft bed is laid out in a seemingly naïve gesture, but one cannot fall asleep on it, because it is intolerably hard.¹¹ Indeed, calling everyone *daddy* is a scandal of the worst kind, one on which the most aggressive Russian obscenities are predicated. One can get at the true meaning of Greek philosophy by reading the already mentioned Heidegger seminar, or by coming to the realization that the same aggressive and horrible scandal was situated at the very heart of all Greek gnoseology. Knowledge was divided into one that was legitimately born, when paternity was obvious, and the bastard one, when the father was unknown and it was unclear whence knowledge had originated. From the end of the first small chapter of *Physics*, we are again thrown back toward its beginning, notably toward the question of *the culpable one*, the cause.

It is shameful not to know who among men is your father. But this knowledge is so intimate that even contemporary biology cannot determine this fact with absolute certainty. The deciding factor is still, like in the times of Aristotle, intimate knowledge. Family resemblance, according to Wittgenstein, is not amenable to formalization. One feels: "There it is, the resemblance, but in what is it?" Both the first attention and the last understanding remain behind this feeling, which is—you might add for accuracy's sake together with Aristotle—mindful. The final correctness, that is to say, being according to Aristotle, resides in it.

What is the outcome of all this? In the first place and always, it is both right and inevitable to grasp the whole. But, all of a sudden, the grasping of the whole shifts towards "in general and as a whole"; το ὅλον turns into τό καθόλον, a noble gaze from the heights of bird's eye-view,

¹¹ *Translator's note:* This is yet another Russian proverb: "One may make up a soft bed (for somebody), but still it will be hard to sleep in."

which observes the shameful, or, maybe the most shameful thing there is, namely a dump, συγκεχυμένα (Aristotle 1961: 184a), where all the fathers are mixed up. In the first instance and always, we are dealing with this dump, which is where we live. The Earth, for Aristotle, is a cosmic dump, where everything falls down and gets mixed. One begins from this, and one must “pass from the common to each-detailed-concrete,” or, to put it more simply, one is nevertheless urged to try and find among men one’s true father, let us say by unconditionally believing the mother.

For now, discerning in Aristotle this tough and sharp strictness, we have apparently not yet lost our way, though the goal is still not within sight. The name given by the history of philosophy to our goal is, as you will recall, “the reconciliation of Aristotle and Plato,” which, according to our theme, implies finding in Aristotle agreement with matter-as-number. For now, having distinguished chaotic formlessness from matter, having concluded that the “dump” is not in matter but in our apperception, and having attuned the search to that which is concrete-detailed-and-belongs-to-each, Aristotle is leading us toward the domain where we are conducting our search.

In the same general direction, there is something about matter, that is to say, about the substrate. Whoever has read the beginning of *Physics* remembers that, after sifting through opinions that make it appear as though the most secure and the ancient are one and the same thing, Aristotle retains a triad, three things: “And similarly ancient is this teaching—that unity and excess and deficiency are the principle of what is” (Aristotle 1961: 189b, 11–13). Excess and deficiency are the unbalanced conditions that depend on one another and that, thereby, emerge from unity and return to it. For an overly bold interpretation of this passage, the substrate, matter, turns out to be a unity, which leaves the state of balance, so as to return to this state again. I still lack the boldness for such an interpretation, and, besides, even if I decide that I have finally understood this passage, I will not know what to do with this understanding. To me, as to Aristotle, it is still clear that for everything that comes into being, in technique or in nature, there is the “out of what,” “that out of which,” and “that which has become.” These three things are different but not opposed.

In the case of that which has become, everything is either simple or simpler: it is determined and one can point at it. That is a statue; that is a bed; that is an educated person. The statue is made of brass. To say “brass” is to leave undetermined the kind of brass and whether it is a piece of brass or several pieces melted together. By comparison with the bed, the tree or wood [*derevo*] is less determined. A mere person—rather than an educated or a refined one, or Socrates—what is that? Aristotle has forewarned us that matter is *not* formless chaos. Is it, then, half way between the undetermined and the determined, that is, half-determined? Is matter somehow not-quite?

I do not see in Aristotle the denigration of matter to some gaffe. It is both unity and being, albeit *not in the same way* as something this-here, τό τὸδε τι, i.e., something about which it would be possible to say, “here is what this is.” With a high degree of certainty, we are therefore advised to see unity in matter, but to see it somehow “otherwise.” How? Perhaps, Aristotle himself doesn’t know, or doesn’t think about this. Do we have the right to think that matter is being with full rights, though not such-and-such but some other being than “this-here”? This is what the ending of Book 1 of *Physics* states: ἐγγύς και οὐσίαν πῶς (Aristotle 1961:192 a6): matter (let us add, like the medieval commentators, *the wood(s)*) is close to being and is, in some sense, being.

It keeps twisting and turning, eluding our grasp.¹² Matter is unity, but in its own way; it is being, but “in some sense.” It is the under-lying or the under-lasting, remaining-itself-under the emergence, a conjoint cause for the form of the emerging (the other cause is *eidōs*), ὑπομένουσα συναρτία. Aristotle also wishes to understand the wood(s). But what does he do? He merely gives us the other designation of the wood(s), namely *mother*. In Latin, the wood(s) is *materia*, and it is as though Aristotle recalls, reproduces, recreates in his language what, in contrast to Latin, has not shown itself in it. Yet another time Aristotle stresses that the feminine beginning is mixed with evil by mistake, when people do not notice the difference between the underlying and the opposing. *Eidōs*, or, let us say, the culture of *eidōs* or of form, is not at all harmed by matter but by ugliness [*bezobrazie*]¹³. Ugliness does not strive toward a form, whereas matter, the feminine, strives toward it, as a wife to the husband.

It is too early, however, to start celebrating our conception of matter as a woman-mother, who strives to motherhood, and of *eidōs* as a masculine principle. This comparison has been pre-delineated, but it will not lead us much further, because Aristotle will interrupt it. *Eidōs* is *entelechy* and *energeia*, hence, fullness. And fullness does not lack anything; there is no striving toward the feminine in it. We obtain a strange masculine. And matter, too, is a woman-mother only “by chance coincidence,” that is, only in the aspect of its being needed for the emergence of form. In other words, either the comparison does not go far, or we do not know what the maternal and the feminine are. The second option is the most likely one. It is not by chance that we think that the wood(s) is the mother.

Why not linger on the same spot empty-handed? Let us pay attention to what we started from, i.e., that the main indeterminacy of the wood(s) has to do with the possibility of its scariness. The same applies to the contemporary form of the wood(s), notably drug addiction. In contrast to this, the Aristotelian *eidōs* is exactly the same as the Platonic good: the fullness

¹² *Translator’s note:* This is a reference to another Russian proverb.

¹³ *Translator’s note:* In Russian, the word *bezobrazie* means both “ugliness” and “lack of form.”

of blessing, realization, the perfection of being. That is why something will be made with [or, “done to,” *delat'sya*] matter and that is why, thanks to this quality, it is double, an “indeterminate doubling.” It is not eternal, since it can be entirely burnt out, or pierced with light, by *eidos*, toward which it strives by itself. But, in another sense, it *always* remains the underlying, not the least under *eidos*. And so, it follows that, like *eidos*, it neither perishes nor comes into being, ἀφθαρτος και ἀγένητος (Aristotle 1961: 192 a23). That is, it is equal to *eidos*. There will never be *eidos* without matter, and only for *eidos* is matter conceivable as the pure wood(s), which has shown that chaos is not its quality. The woods as heaven, as the Renaissance woods of Boccaccio, as a park, or the Earth as a garden... But, in a way, we have already known the calling of the woods to be heaven and a garden. Our task is different: through eternity, the wood(s) has approximated the idea, but does it follow from this that the wood(s) is number? Or, have we already found the answer, without noticing it?

When Aristotle speaks of a surge, a striving, and that toward which it strives, ἐφετόν, he does not ask whether it is a striving toward good or toward evil. It is impossible to strive otherwise than toward the good, and every striving is, by definition, toward θεῖον, toward ἀγαθόν.¹⁴ There is no evil in striving. Whenever there is a striving, it is toward the good, but it also could have not been, and it is *precisely* this “could have not been” that creates ἀντικείμενον. To say “the opposing” is to speak at a purely technical level. Still, it will not be superfluous to recall the etymology of the word “Satan”: the Contradicting. Behind every “yes,” there is a “no,” like its ineluctable shadow.

In that case, is “the opposing” also a candidate for matter? Is matter the place of (if not the reason for) the division between good and evil, not in the sense that matter is evil, but in the sense that, had there been no wood(s), there wouldn't have been evil, either? If matter is a woman, is this a fight over a woman? But, then, why doesn't a beautiful contemplation of eternal femininity say anything about this fight? Here is yet another instance when I am obliged to let go even of the smallest thing I have grasped. I know nothing.

Let us linger again, and let us console ourselves with the cheap pleasure of having dismissed a certain mix, the frequent conflation of matter and nature. Of course, here we must calmly agree with Aristotle. It only seems to us that nature and matter are one and the same thing due to our hurriedness and inattentiveness. A bed has been made out of fresh wood. It has been left in a garden, sunk into the soil, caught rain, and the wood of the bed germinated. Rather than another piece of furniture, a tree grew out of the bed. The wood [or a tree, *derevo*] is obviously nature; therefore, the materials of the bed and nature are one and the same?

¹⁴ *Translator's note:* “Toward the divine, toward the good.”

No. After all, what germinated was not the matter of the bed; the wood germinated exactly when it *forgot* that it was the bed's matter. What enabled growth was not a possibility of the wood/tree, used as matter by a carpenter, but the form of the wood / tree itself. Nature would not have allowed—or, better yet, will never allow—to make a bed out of a tree / wood. Nature is by itself, and matter adapts itself to that for which it is.

But our woods, too, are different from nature. It is as if we see them before we see nature. They are noisy, dark, undetermined. Indeterminacy is, somehow, being; “indeterminate being” is one of the definitions of matter, including for Aristotle. Like the Aristotelian $\omega\lambda\eta$, our woods are always not-yet-formed.

For Aristotle, $\omega\lambda\eta$ is certainly being ($\sigma\upsilon\sigma\iota\alpha$ is translated as *essence*), but we still need to look closer in order to see what kind of being it is. For him, nature is almost exemplary being, without any reservations. Here, it is not even necessary to look closer, and Aristotle gets angry with those blind enough not to see that nature—that is the self-moving, an automaton—is and that it is full-fledged being. With the same word, Aristotle says that nature itself moves out of and through itself (for him, *movement* means much more than it does for us: it *changes, grows*, and in general has its own history; were the word “development” not spoiled in our vocabulary, it would have been an apt translation for the Aristotelian $\kappa\acute{\iota}\nu\eta\sigma\iota\varsigma$) and, again with the same word or expression, he implies that nature moves away from itself, by itself, and that it is conceived, known, or recognized, $\gamma\nu\acute{\omega}\rho\iota\mu\omicron\nu$, from itself and by itself (Aristotle 1961:193a, 5–6). That is to say: just open your eyes, and it will show itself by itself, letting know and telling about itself. One symptom of stupidity or blindness, is not seeing this obviousness, namely that both before our eyes and within us almost everything is self-moving, an automaton. Instead of mere seeing, reasoning begins, which is similar to the blind discussing colors. Having said this about the obviousness of nature, we will not touch upon the theme of the automaton at this time. We should always remember, however, that the issue is a real, spontaneous automaton and should not think that the continuation of a genus, for instance, depends on an endless repetition of the same form. On the contrary, a natural genus knows how to change and it seems to be capable of eliminating itself entirely, giving place to others. That is, by adapting itself to the automaton of the world, it seems to be capable of the new.

We are hunting for the wood(s), which is our only theme, while, for Aristotle, it is only one of many. Our excuse is that, besides the wood(s), we are still not seeing anything. I am not talking about finding in the wood(s) a support structure, as materialists tend to do, nor about opposing the wood(s) to reason. I also resist being seduced by various hunches or clues, such as those about the Russian woods, about the femininity or maternity of the Russian soul, and similar aesthetic constructs. The only hunch, which we are in the process of verifying, is that the indeterminacy

of the wood(s) somehow coincides with strictness, be it mathematical, geometrical, or logical. Let me reiterate this task, making it more precise. We wanted to understand Plato, for whom matter is number. In Aristotle, we literally found this very formula, copied it on the blackboard, but in a critical and ironic sense. We did not wish to choose between different “points of view.” In fact, we should have accepted Aristotle’s objection, but the hunch forced us to search for the secret like-mindedness of Plato and Aristotle, despite all the lexical differences between them.

And so, it turns out that we have found what we have been looking for when we read Aristotle’s take on the striving of matter, of the mother, to the divine. (If you bothered looking into Losev’s book on Aristotle, where there is a lot on the theme of matter, you found a characteristic typing error there. It makes no sense to say that, next to the form, or *eidōs*, the existing or the under-lying is a conjoint cause of the appearing “akin to matter.” In reality, Losev wrote that it is “akin to the mother” (Losev 1975: 59), that is to say, *eidōs* as father, and matter as mother. The wood(s) strive toward the good, the divine. It follows that *in its striving* Aristotelian matter is the same the Platonic divine idea. Which is what needed to be proven.

On the other hand, this solution only leads to a multiplication of tasks (though, for Plato, matter is also dark). It will be crucial to rethink the Beautiful Lady, or the Eternal Feminine, also in this way: we seem to have always thought that only she attracts and enraptures us, while Aristotle speaks of her attraction to the masculine. Does this mean that the words, *Das Ewig-Weibliche zieht uns hinan*,¹⁵ in the end of the second part of Goethe’s *Faust* imply both our raptness by the Eternally-Feminine and its own striving? And yet another problem: Are the feminine and the maternal the same thing? Or are they different?

Having unwittingly and lightly reconciled Plato and Aristotle, let us nonetheless, finish reading Book 2 of *Physics*, as planned.

Persistently paying attention to the notion that the automaton of nature is governed by final causes and not pushed to another condition by situational factors, Aristotle makes the same strong argument as the contemporary critics of vulgar Darwinism: If you say that sheer chance is responsible for the distribution of living varieties, out of which the fittest survive, then show me such a distribution between two species that are close to one another. The species are right here, but the intermediate forms that turned out to be unsuccessful can be neither found in the fossils nor observed today. And there is another argument, which also used, albeit infrequently: technique imitates nature in many respects, and it posits purposes. Doesn’t the very possibility of imitating nature mean that nature, too, strives toward certain purposes (Aristotle 1961: 199 a15–6)? Or, again:

¹⁵ Translation: “the Eternally-Feminine draws us upwards.”

technique can miss its mark because it is, so to speak, dictated not by the past but by the future, that is to say, by that which is not. It follows that it makes a leap over non-being and ignorance, breaking the chain. But in nature, as well, we see failures, since monsters are rather failures than the experiments of nature in its search for new, more adapted forms. And further: if one is concerned with the fact that, in nature, there is no discussion of purposes whatsoever, one should only look more attentively at technique, where there is also no discussion; its striving toward a goal proceeds more by the path of intuition, guessing, the swing of the pendulum between a dead-end, or hopelessness, and “insight”—that is, by an unaccountable breakthrough.

What is said about nature refers to any breakthrough toward a purpose, or the final cause, including that of matter. In 200a, 6–10 Aristotle notes: a saw appeared not because, under the influence of some processes, iron got sharpened into the teeth of a saw, but because one must saw, and if a saw is to exist, then it requires sharp and strong teeth, made of steel. Similarly, animal teeth appeared not because of the chemical conditions for their formation, but because of the need for something to bite with.

But isn't it true that, *in the beginning*, there must be matter, so that teeth would be formed out of it? This is not at all certain. It is not absurd to say that iron is created by the purpose—the saw—rather than that the saw is made of iron. A saw and everything similar to it are called forth by the need to cut, and this purpose required iron; *otherwise, perhaps there wouldn't have been any iron at all*. The saw with its purpose, *to saw*, procured for itself iron, which it lit up, required, drew out of non-being. A house is needed, and this goal *to have a house* procures for itself matter or materials, lit up and first drawn from their discovery (Aristotle 1961: 200a, 24). We might add that the *mother* herself is like a husband who looks for a wife and *creates* her, since, if such as thing as a husband did not exist, there wouldn't have been a wife and a woman as a mother. The mother, matter is created by those who determine a purpose.

In general, all of matter is lit up, accentuated, and directly created by the purpose. Were there no purpose, were there no “for what,” there wouldn't have been “out of what,” either.

But the inverse is also true: were there, in principle, nowhere and at no time *at all*, any matter as the ready-striving, the purpose would not have been attained, either.

As Aristotle formulates it, “the purpose is the cause of matter.” Matter emerges from the attraction of the purpose. Every emergence strives toward being.

Thanks to Aristotle we note that, similarly for us, our matter, the wood(s), also emerges in light a purpose, the goal of becoming at home in the world.

If for a long time, matter, which is eternal, has striven to the completeness of a countenance, then how can it still retain—nowadays, in our

times—some not-yet? Plenty of time has passed, in which matter should have already entirely passed into *eidōs*, the woods becoming a garden, or heaven.

At fault here are not some imperfections but something stricter and tougher, namely the counter-position, which I have already mentioned. It is neither in matter nor in *eidōs* but in the fact that every becoming of a countenance immediately counter-poses itself to ugliness and, thereby, puts ugliness on the scene! The counter-posed is behind the good, the divine, fullness of being, light, determination... As though it would have been better not to come into being. Only that which remains separate is safe and sound. The counter-posed emerges well in advance of the attempt at practical realization; whatever you think about, a countermovement or an objection surfaces right away. As though it would have been better not to move. As a Russian proverb goes: “Don’t do good, and there will be no evil.”

Or, have we again failed to notice something? Is it the case that during all this time, perfection has not had the time to realize itself in nature? Is it the case that nature does not embrace everything? And is it the case that matter—say, the wood(s)—was not a living forest, before it was transformed into problematic construction materials? It seems that, after all, something perfect and final has had enough time to inch closer to *eidōs*. All of nature is this successful inching closer to *eidōs*; nature has succeeded in this and that is why it is beautiful.

But, then, what has not been realized, has not fulfilled its purpose, is not-yet? Take an example, which is actually not an example but the heart of the matter: a doctor and an architect. We say that they are both specialists, professionals. What is the difference between them? It doesn’t have to do with the fact that they construct different objects—first constructs health, while the second builds houses. Is the difference between them much more important than this?

It is that, if a doctor stops working, the patient might still recover, but if an architect stops working, the house won’t ever build itself, under any circumstances. While a doctor is required for the improvement of health, and an architect is needed for the construction of a house, the latter cannot say like the former does—“That’s it, now you will start convalescing”—“That’s it, now the house will finish building itself...” When a doctor works, health does not come from him, but comes by itself, from nature, with the assistance of the doctor. Yet, an architect does not only *help* the house to be built. Matter is both here and there: health [*z-dorov’ye*] as “good wood” for the doctor, on the one hand, and the good wood of the architect, on the other. In nature, however, movement, or change, proceeds by itself out of itself, *automatically* (Aristotle 1961: 1034 a10), by its own thrust, spontaneously, *inside matter and on the inside of matter as well*, whereas in technique it arrives from the outside, from *another* beginning.

If only the art of architecture were built into or inherent in stone, wood, and lime as nature is in a body, and both were striving on equal terms toward a perfect countenance as they are doing it now, then, just as a tired and sick body convalescence, so strewn stones, scattered trees, cement, and sand would have gathered themselves together and grown into houses. There wouldn't have been a problem, because matter and form always are.

In nature, becoming is handed over to an automaton, the real automaton, which never gets tired, never breaks, and repairs itself. The automaton is somehow built into nature; the *sophia* of the world is this very automaton. And what about technique? It is a "beginning in the other." Whence the other, the intrusion of the other? Plato had no answer, which is why he simply introduced it in *Parmenides* as one of the first beginnings that are, and that do not invite any further inquiries.

The theme of matter as a mother in Aristotle returns to *Timaeus* 49a. In the next session, after a few more remarks about matter in Aristotle, we will move on to *Timaeus*.

Chapter 8

Parthenogenesis is a possibility that is available only to invertebrates. If our reading of Aristotle has been correct and the *masculine* is the beginning of the historical, the eidetic, and the logical, then one should not be preoccupied with the fragility of this—Aristotelian and Platonic—idealism. Such idealism is included in, or introduced into, human existence with the same basic stability as the masculine principle, required for the continuation of humankind, since the feminine alone is insufficient.

On the other hand, the stability of this union of matter and sense is guaranteed by the fact that, by itself, matter strives towards *logos*, towards *eidos* (for now, we can take up these two terms together, prior to drawing a distinction between them). This needs to be said, because the understanding of matter as passive resistance to the active *eidos* is a typical error. After everything I've said and cited here, a listener may object: "But still, for Aristotle, *eidos* and matter are too opposed to one another." I repeat: they are not at all opposed, because matter is the *underlying*, not the *opposed*. Matter is *eidos* in its potency, not in the sense that *eidos* can be produced out of it, but in the sense that it wants to become *eidos* and tends toward sense, by itself and out of itself. Among the most recent works on the subject, I would like to single out a thousand-page philologico-philosophical encyclopedia by Heinz Happ, *Hyle: Studien zum aristotelischen Materie-Begriff* (Happ 1971). After a detailed investigation on the subject of *Vollkommenheitsstreben der Hyle*, the author writes:

Man fragt sich, warum diese stets bekannten Einzelzüge der aristotelischen Hyle nicht schon längst das klischeehafte Bild von der 'passiven' Hyle korrigiert haben, ja wie es überhaupt zu diesem Bild kommen konnte [...]. Die Hyle des Aristoteles ist eine Metamorphose des 'vorsokratischen' Materie-Prinzips, den aristotelischen Problemstellungen anverwandelt und in neue Zusammenhänge hineinverwoben, aber voll ungebrochener Kraft (Happ 1971:775).¹⁶

Alexander of Aphrodisias, Avicenna, and especially Averroes “hatten [...] mit ihrer sehr dynamischen Interpretation der aristotelischen Materie durchaus nicht unrecht” (Happ 1971: 777).¹⁷

It seems to me (though this is only an impression, since it is difficult to say anything determinate here) that “we,” namely the modern readers of Aristotle, are rather concerned that there might be *much* of matter, that is to say, *too* much in the sense of *immeasurably* much. And we would have liked to moderate, or somehow make sense of it, for instance by conceptualizing it. *Essentially*, since we have such an intention, there is also in us something that counteracts it—a worry that we have imposed too much order, or put too much effort into organizing, matter, which is why we think that the time has come to give freedom to substance, to the world. In relation to this intention, we swing, as though on a pendulum, between the extremes of an energetic organization, when we decisively determine, “That is how it is, and let it be so!” and of a liberal sensitivity that urges us, “Perhaps, it is not like this and you must look and listen more attentively.”

You must, quicker, by all means and at any cost set the tone both in the decisive and in the expectant states. In Aristotle’s thought, however, the tone is set by something else—by the “always already.” From his perspective, all of the matter of the world is already enraptured by the world in the sense of a calm fullness. Heinz Happ, whom I have already cited, pays attention to *On the Heavens* I.9, where it is proven that the world is one and that, in its fullness, it contains all the matter there is:

The *cosmos* as a whole, therefore, includes all its appropriate matter, which is, as we saw, natural perceptible body. So that neither are there now, nor have there ever been, nor can there ever be formed more heavens than one, but this heaven of ours is one and unique and complete (Happ 1971).

¹⁶ On the subject of the striving of *hyle* to perfection, “it is asked why these distinct and well-known markers of the Aristotelian *hyle* have not yet corrected the cliché of a ‘passive’ *hyle*—and, in any case, how could such an image have emerged? Aristotle’s *hyle* is a metamorphosis of the ‘pre-Socratic’ principle of matter, corresponding to the Aristotelian formulation of the problem and included in a new context, but full of undiminished power.”

¹⁷ “...were not so wrong in their dynamic interpretation of Aristotelian matter.”

The proofs that this chapter of *On the Heavens* furnishes are connected with Aristotle's thought in its entirety, and the most crucial thing in Aristotle's message is, precisely, this tone, which is akin to a musical tonality.

We have no right to argue whether this tone is true or untrue, or whether it is critical or uncritical, because in the decisive and the expectant states alike, coloring our relation to the world, there is *the same fullness*, placed under the sign of *one must* in the absence of understanding that every truly philosophical *must be* always already *is*. From *what is* we have fallen into *what must be*. In this, we are like Aristotle's famous disciple Alexander the Great, who was guided in his life by the fullness of the world as his main thought, but stopped seeing this fullness as something that already is and imagined it as something that *must be*, achievable as soon as the Hellenic army crosses the Ganges, traverses the small remaining distance to the shore of the ocean, and so reaches the final edge of the Earth's circumference.

Matter is both a thing, an object, and, prior to the inversion of the subject-object relation in modernity, a subject, the under-lying, which is open to—determination [*pod-lezhaschee, kotoroe podlezhit--opredeleniyu*]. It is *that about which* one will be able to say something, or establish a category, the about-what of judgment. The material cause is “that out of which,” including in the sense of “*out of what* you have a dispute.” Neither *due to what* (that will be another cause, namely the formal) nor *because of whom* (who was the first to begin, which yet another cause, namely the effective or the moving) nor *for the sake of what* (the final cause) but, precisely, *out of what*.

Ancient thought, like any powerful way of thinking, dislikes oblique and fabricated moves—dislikes lagging behind direct givenness—to such an extent that it is not at all shocked by the very thing that shocked the editor of Losev's volume on Aristotle, who “corrected” *out of the mother* [*iz materj*] so that it became *out of matter* [*iz materij*]. It will be sobering and enlightening to say: everything has been literally born out of the mother. When you put it like this and look in this way, you will see the unsuitability of the question, “What is matter?” What is a mother? The mother is the one who has given birth to us. Let us look at ourselves, the way we are. The mother is something that was before us and was such that we could appear in the world. The so-called anthropic principle is included here as an obvious particular case: if the mother, out of whom we came, is essentially such that we can be as we are, then the mother of the mother, as well as the first mother, or matter, out of which we came, is, of course, such that we are out of it.

Here, of course, the determination of matter or of the mother does not follow the path of a curiosity-driven inquiry about an “interesting object” outside of us, notably our mother. The meaning of defining is quite different: to know how we should *be* given that we are the way we are,

having come out of the mother. How should we comport ourselves? Such a definition is not at the behest of the interest to know (just imagine the son's interest to know the mother) but is included in the main question of any thought, a question that is so constant that it is not even expressed: How to *be* [*Kak byt'*]?¹⁸

We are out of the mother. But are we *because of* the mother or following the goals of the mother? The initiative belonged to—the goal was set by—the father; the father *determined* whether it would be good or bad that the mother would give birth. The father is the determination of the mother; *logos* has a paternal nature. Dealing with the determination of matter, of the mother, we are carrying on the work of the father. It is said that the father has known [*poznal*] the mother, not within the framework of a scientific curiosity to know, but in the sense of a determination (as we say, *it's necessary to decide* [*opredelit'sya*]). The man decided: he “takes” a woman to be his wife or “lets her go,” leaving her. When a woman leaves, she decides and determines. Matriarchy, the woman's decision and determination, is possible as an alternative to patriarchy. At least for now, we do are not familiar with such an order, which—we might suppose—existed a long time ago. Moreover, for us, here and now, it is unimportant whether or not it has ever existed. What is crucial is that discussions of matriarchy on the subject of its past existence and possibility, show that the *noticeable*, visible or genus-related [*vidnoe*], eidetic (*eidos* = genus [*vid*]) condition of man is marked. The theme of matriarchy and that of feminism only *underline once more* a special, marked condition of man. The louder the voices of feminists are, the more noticeable, clear, and prominent is the condition of man, rather than that of woman.

The current name for the defining and decisive role of *logos* in classical philosophy is *phal-logo-centrism* or phallogentrism, meaning that the phallus, the penis, and *logos* are in the center. This term, in its turn, stands in the middle of the liveliest quarrel in contemporary thought. The quarrel, in its essence, is about a woman.

The term *phal-logo-centrism* resonates with its naked truth: “That is exactly what happens: *logos* as a masculine determination is introduced with this quintessentially masculine hard durability by Aristotle into the body, into matter, into the feminine.” From the little we know about him, it seems that Aristotle did not introduce it either unwittingly or unnoticeably or out of a naïve adolescent incapability to speak about anything but his penis. Rather, he did so with a clear will, intently, in the full light of day. More than that, he speaks of the *duty* of determination. Yes, the masculine must take the initiative, assuming a central position. It appears that Aristotle quite consciously *develops phal-logo-centrism*.

¹⁸ Translator's note: In Russian, *kak byt'?* literally means “how to be?” as well as “how to behave?” or “what course of action to follow?”

Does this mean that Jacques Derrida was doubly right? To be sure, his thesis, aptly summarized by Geoffrey Bennington, is exactly the following:

...l'apport de Derrida à l'histoire de la philosophie, ce qui en ferait un 'contemporain', interdit d'une part que la philosophie relegue la différence sexuelle au statut d'objet de science régionale sous prétexte d'une neutralité transcendentale qui en fait aura toujours voilé un privilège du masculin (d'où 'phallogocentrisme'), et d'autre part qu'on essaie tout simplement de débouter ce masculin transcendantal pour le remp lacer par un féminin (Bennington & Derrida 1993: 206).¹⁹

Aristotle does not brush away the masculine and the feminine as subsidiary issues; like *eidōs* and matter-mother, they are within plain view. Still, this does not invalidate Derrida's position, because a vast majority of metaphysicians do exactly that (otherwise, Vladimir Solovyev would not have presented his thematization of the masculine-feminine as a novelty).

But now let us leave behind this official language of philosophy and let us listen to Derrida as he speaks for himself, in the basement, in the marked additions, in the lower lines of the book that narrates about him, in the absolutely intimate autobiographical notes, which at some point, twenty years ago, he did not want to ever show to anyone, in any case. Let us really *listen* to Derrida, since—otherwise—it makes no sense to approach him. He, himself, *hears* the word, thereby causing an inattentive reader to slip literally on every step of the way. I suggest for translation an important phrase: “*Dès qu'il est saisi par l'écriture, le concept est cuit.*”²⁰ *Cuit*: “to boil,” but also “to glaze,” as one glazes bricks, as well as “to cook,” to bring to the right state of readiness. *Cuit*: “ready” or “boiled,” but also “burnt,” as in *face cuite*. “The thing is done,” “it's a clinch,” “easy as a pie,” is said with the same word: *C'est du tout cuit*. But also: “to be toast, to get caught, to meet one's death,” *être cuit*. Is it not true that the difference passes between “brought to completion, ready” and “it's a clinch” and “to be toast”? What does Derrida mean, and how should a translator behave? What, for a translator, is the difference between terms, *différence*, is, for Derrida, who introduces this new word into the French language, *différance*, “dissemination.” Any uttered word always disseminates itself,

¹⁹ “Derrida's contribution to the history of philosophy, what would make him a ‘contemporary’—disallows *on the one hand* that philosophy relegate sexual difference to the status of an object of a regional science on the pretext of a transcendental neutrality which in fact has always veiled a privilege of the masculine (whence ‘phallogocentrism’), and *on the other hand* that we attempt simply to unseat this masculine transcendental to replace it with a feminine.”

²⁰ “As soon as it is caught by writing, the concept is done for.”

melts before one's eyes, gets burnt, and *there is nothing one can do here*. It is impossible to cope with or fix it; we think that we have grasped something in a word but are, actually, dealing with movement. Writing, then, arrests (this is one of the meanings of *saisir*), or else, fries or glazes, the concept. Is this good or bad? Is it very bad or necessary (and, in this sense, good), just as, in order to make a bowl, one must glaze the clay of which it is made?

The masculine, phallogocentrism, gets disseminated as soon as it appears on the scene, much like "patriarchy" that immediately reminds us of the earlier "matriarchy." With the words "woman" and "mother," Derrida does not designate the opposite of the masculine, exactly as Aristotle does not; this is one of those cases when any thought, if it is a thought, is one. More likely, he refers to a complex situation, where an opposition or diverse oppositions can emerge. How is this possible? Before responding to this question, permit me to make two remarks. *First*, Derrida does not fall prey to naïve forgetting, which befalls whoever, in saying "woman," is speaking about the mother, and, in saying "mother," is speaking about a woman. He is situated within the Biblical tradition, which by *Eve*—meaning something like "the mother of everything that lives"—names the wife, the woman of Adam. Derrida does not forget about the mother, while speaking about the feminine. He forces us to think about the difference between them. *Second*, on page 73 of the book by Bennington-Derrida, the names (*surnoms*) *femme mère* on the upper, light-suffused side of the line, approximately correspond to the intimate proper name, inscribed on the lower, dark side. Sultana Esther Georgette Safar Derrida is the full name of Jacques Derrida's mother, and the entire basement of the book includes records of the days and months of her long illness and death at a hospital in Nice. The one who is out of her writes about her. At the beginning, "mother" therefore means this one, the closest one, out of whom everything is.

"Mother," in Derrida, is the name for the "already," *déjà*, and for "text." Text is that on which deconstruction works, the "matter" of Derrida's thought. Deconstruction is neither curiosity nor the search for a definition, but, before all else, the opening of that "dissemination," which I have already mentioned. It follows that it is not the "mother" that explains what "text" is, what "textile" is, but, rather, that her naming posits the question of what the feminine and the maternal are. This "mother," this matter that posits questions, is prior to the opposition good-evil, the opposition masculine-feminine, and prior to truth-lie. It's worth accentuating and remembering the sense of this *prior to* not as something doubtful and slippery, either a truth or a lie, but as a task to look into, think through, and see that to which good-bad is inapplicable.

This non-negative non-relation of the maternal-feminine to good-evil exactly corresponds to the pre-oppositionality of the Aristotelian substrate. To wit, Derrida himself does not notice this correlation and, in

principle, can never notice it because, as soon as he takes the *texts* of Aristotle and Plato (those of the latter more frequently than those of the former) and reads them, he already sees in them, in advance, what is customary, i.e., an opposition of the masculine to the feminine—that is, phallogentrism—and of speech to writing—that is, logocentrism. Unfortunately, the main and the loudest line of French thought assumes in advance the belonging of classical authors to the deconstructed metaphysics. Going against this critical, revolutionary pose means keeping for oneself a minority of readers, while Derrida obviously stays with the majority.

But it is not up to us to accuse Derrida of an incorrect interpretation of his authors. Nietzsche did not even reach the stage of an incorrect interpretation, because he only read about them in encyclopedia summaries. *That is not the point*. If only the readers, who are reading me on the surface, on the upper, light-suffused side of the line in the book, could guess what my life consists of: constant prayer and tears (...*car à la manière de SA je n'aime que les larmes, je n'aime et ne parle qu'à travers elles...*²¹) (Bennington 1993: 98) and the desire to die, not of tiredness but, on the contrary, of the insufferable slipping away of fullness, the impossibility to repeat or to duplicate it. This is what we have called and identified as the indispensable, primary, unchangeable condition of any thought: the prayer as the self-presentation to God:

...à Dieu, le seul que je prenne à témoin, sans savoir encore ce que veulent dire ces mots sublimes, et cette grammaire française, et à, et Dieu, et prendre, prendre Dieu, et non seulement je prie, comme je n'ai jamais cessé de le faire dans ma vie, et le prie, mais je le prends ici et le prends a temon, je me donne ce qu'il me donne c'est-à-dire le c'est-à-dire de prendre le temps de prendre Dieu à témoin (Bennington & Derrida 1993: 56, 57).²²

Let God be the witness to everything that is comprehended in itself and that is incomprehensible in itself. From the impossibility of duplicating the moment arises the constant thought of *putting an end to one's life*, not in the sense of contemplating a suicide but in the sense of wagering one's life and death, as the price that is not too exorbitant when it comes to paying for the luxury—for the happiness—of a lasting moment. Because of this, since his childhood when adults amused themselves with the ease with which, all of a sudden, they could make this child cry, he has loved those who cried easily: Rousseau, Nietzsche, St. Augustine.

²¹ “...for like SA I love only tears, I only love and speak through them...”

²² “...to God, the only one I take as a witness, without yet knowing what these sublime words mean, and this grammar, and *to*, and *witness*, and *God*, and *take*, take God, and not only do I pray, as I have never stopped doing all my life, and pray to him, but I take him here and take him as my witness, I give myself what he gives me, i.e. the *i.e.* to take the time to take God as a witness.”

Due to the impossibility of duplicating, or photographing, the “now,” I am dead already now: hence, the beginning of tears. I cry for myself, simply carrying on the mother’s crying over a sick and perhaps dying son, remembering the prior deaths of two other sons, two brothers. The continuation of the mother’s tears as the continuation of life out of her.

Self-presentation to God is not at all one’s self-description before Him, as though He doesn’t already know everything without this act. Nor is it the truthfulness or sincerity of a message, but the asking [*proshenie*] for this gift, *don*, which has been in everything that is, or—what amounts to the same thing—the asking of *forgiveness*, *pardon*, requesting that everything *remain* as it is, together with the asking of forgiveness [*vmeste s prosheniem proscheniya*] for the impossibility of repeating and holding onto the given. Therefore, everything that happens, including autobiography, turns into theology. Just scratch the surface, and next to the unbearable experience of the slipping-away; next to the constant dream of death; next to crying and the constant prayer, I am

...n’interessent au fond de l’escarre ni l’écriture ni la littérature, ni l’art, ni la philosophie, ni la science, ni la religion, ni la politique, seulement la mémoire et le coeur, non pas même l’histoire de la présence du présent (Bennington & Derrida 1993: 87).²³

The asking of forgiveness—that is, of what I cannot give while God can—precisely confirms the repeated giving of *everything* and is, itself, sure of one thing alone: the confirmation and identification of that which is, that it is what it is in the very way it is, without assuming any degree of knowledge regarding what I am, or what God, the gift, and forgiveness are. What, then, could one’s own body be? This, too, is unknown and will likely remain unknown, despite all the increases in biological knowledge. Still, not everything is confined to the darkness of the dark and indeterminate woods. Cutting through darkness, tears, and unknowability is a fact that is indubitable, that cries out and is always evident. Despite its inexplicable nature, this fact is absolutely determinate: on the seventh day after the birth of this mysterious creature, of myself, whose documents bear the name Jacques Derrida and whose secret name is Elie Derrida, the hands of an uncle, also called Elie, firmly held his body on the lap, while the *mohel*, invested with ancient rights of uncertain origin, conducted over this small infant body the surgical act of circumcision, reminiscent of the first such act, which was carried out with a stone knife.

Why? For what? These questions will steer us to the history of religion and mythology, but they are quite superfluous next to the indubita-

²³ “...interested in the depth of the bedsore, not in writing or literature, art, philosophy, science, religion or politics but only memory and heart, not even the history of the presence of the present.”

ble and observable fact: those who gathered for the ritual conducted over this body, over a particular part of this body, which serves the continuation of the genus—the penis, the phallus—a surgery that cut off the ring of the foreskin. The sharply marked character and the multilayered nature of this event was further accentuated by what was intentionally and markedly *not performed* during the ritual, and the non-performance itself pointed toward the performance of this part in other cases, at other times, when the mother (sometime in the past) had to eat the cut ring of the foreskin or when (up until 1843 in Paris when and where this practice was deemed unhygienic) the *mohel* had to suck the blood off from the penis awash in wine after the circumcision in a ritual called *mezizah*. In other words, here we have sacred cannibalism (hence, the legend about the ritualistic devouring of babies by the Jews) and a ritualistic, religious consecration of fellatio.

For a long time, these themes have been surfacing in different books by Derrida. Others might have considered them accidental, but not Derrida himself, who wrote in his diary on 20.12.1976:

Circumcision, je n'ai jamais parlé que de ça, considérez le discours sur la limite, les marges, marques, marches, etc., la clôture, l'anneau (alliance et don), le sacrifice, l'écriture du corps, le pharmakos exclu ou retranché, la coupure/couture de Glas, le coup et le recoudre, d'où l'hypothèse selon laquelle c'est de ça, la circumcision, que, sans le savoir, en n'en parlant jamais ou en parlant au passage, comme d'un exemple, je parlais ou me laissais parler toujours, à moins que; autre hypothèse, la circoncision elle-même ne soit qu'un exemple de ça dont je parlais, oui mais j'ai été, je suis et je serais toujours, moi et non un autre, circoncis, et il y a là une région qui n'est plus d'exemple, c'est elle qui m'intéresse et me dit non pas comment je suis un cas mais où je ne suis plus un cas, quand le mot d'abord, qu moins, CIRCUNCIS, à travers tant et tant de relais, multipliés par ma 'culture', le latin, la philosophie, etc., tel qu'il s'est imprimé dans ma langue à son tour circoncise, n'a pas pu ne pas travailler, tirer en arrière, de tous les côtés, aimer, oui, un mot, milah (Bennington & Derrida 1993: 70–72).²⁴

²⁴ “Circumcision, that’s all I’ve ever talked about, consider the discourse on the limit, margins, marks, marches, etc., the closure, the ring (alliance and gift), the sacrifice, the writing of the body, the *pharmakos* excluded or cut off, the cutting/sewing of *Glas*, the blow and the sewing back up, whence the hypothesis according to which it’s that, circumcision, that, without knowing it, never talking about it or talking about it in passing, as though it were an example, that I was always speaking or having spoken, unless, another hypothesis, circumcision itself were merely an example of the thing I was talking about, yes but I have been, I am and always will be, me and not another, circumcised, and there’s a region that is no longer that of an example, that’s the one that interests me and tells me not how I am a case but where I am no longer a case, when the word first of all, at least, CIRCUNCISED, across so many relays, multiplied by

Milah, meaning “word,” shares the root with *mohel*.

If, sensing the softening influence of the Catholic French culture, Algerian Jews referred to a “christening” instead of circumcision and to *la communion* instead of *Bar Mitzwa*, then this only interiorized and therefore drove still deeper the self-accusation of a secret ritual murder, forcing the practitioners secretly to acknowledge it, and thus tying them all the more firmly to the abyssal mix of shame, hiding, and the need to find excuses.

The same secret aspiration, touching only him and him alone, ties Derrida to his literature, to everything that he writes. He aspires toward an impossible task—to untie the knot tied by circumcision. And so, it is not enough to read the text, his material or matter; rather, it must be eaten, sucked as though it were the foreskin, its cut ring. After all, the word, in Hebrew, is precisely the cut, the circumcised, *milah*.

This knot also involves the relation to the father, whose ring Derrida *was unable to keep* and lost after his death. At that time, he began to dream of a book about “circumcision,” about this shadowy, offstage world of scars, ulcers, cutting, cannibalism, birth through the flowing blood, through sucking, through devouring, and not only once. The same bond through the flesh, through the body, as a direct continuation of the pain of circumcision, was expressed in a strange burning in the area of the belly, as though something irradiated from the diffuse zone around the sexual organ: the threat of castration renewed every time at the sight of, and sympathy for, the pain of the other, regardless of whether it was a relative or a complete stranger, with whom there is no identification whatsoever. Gut sympathy to any pain, *sympathie algique autour de mon sexe* (Bennington & Derrida 1993: 108),²⁵ was experienced clearly for the first time in his early childhood, at the sight of blood streaming from the vagina of his cousin, injured by a scooter at the age of seven or eight.

To dig up and open up this knot, linking various generations through blood ties; to dig up what is one’s most intimate and secret, the circumcision and that which is cut off—the word; to glimpse this underground is to discover an ostensibly new and hitherto unknown language. The secret Elie, the patron of circumcision, will peer through the visible Jacques and the walls will be broken. This is both risky and difficult. It requires the decision to become

...le seul philosophe à ma connaissance qui, accueilli — plus ou moins — dans l’institution académique, auteur d’écrits plus ou moins légitimes sur Platon, Augustin, Descartes, Rousseau, Kant, Hegel, Husserl, Heidegger,

my ‘culture’, Latin, philosophy, etc., as it imprinted itself on my language circumcised in its turn, could not have not worked on me, pulling me backward, in all directions, to love, yes, a word, *milah*.”

²⁵ “that algic sympathy around my sexual organ.”

Benjamin, Austin, aura osé décrire son pénis, comme promis, de façon concise et détaillée, et comme on n'aura jamais osé, sous la Renaissance, peindre le pénis circoncis du Christ, sous le prétexte incroyable qu'on n'avait pas de modèle" (Bennington & Derrida 1993: 115).²⁶

In this way, the word should be tied to the gut, simultaneously with the most intimate, the most sacred, and the tightest of bonds. What does not pass over directly into circumcision belongs to the boring, the unnecessary, mere literature.

Yet, the drive to know oneself suddenly *leads away* from oneself, to a strange twin or a double, who, precisely because he is so much myself in everything, peels off, is completely separated, cut off from myself. When Derrida writes this down, as though reminding himself about the inaccessibility of the twin, his son Jean wakes up and tells his wife Marguerite, on July 17, 198(?), that "he dreamt he had a double" and that the double was "grammatical." Because of the inaccessible depths, at which circumcision has cut into him [*vrezalos' obrezanie*], Derrida makes desperate, absolutely risky moves. Framing himself, showing off [*podstavlyayet-sya, vystavlyaya*] that which is most secret, intimate, and shameful, he wants to *write*

...le mélange su cette cène incroyable du vin et du sang, le donner à voir comme je le vois sur mon sexe chaque fois que du sang se mêle au sperme ou à salive de la fellation, décrire mon sexe à travers des millénaires du judaïsme, le décrire (microscopie, photographie, stéréophototypie) jusqu'à crever le papier, faire baver, mouiller les lèvres, en haut et en bas, de tous les lecteurs, étendus à leur tour sur les coussins, à même les genoux du 'parrain' Elie (Bennington & Derrida 1993: 153, 154).²⁷

Self-fellatio-circumcision, being a *mohel* over oneself, is the ritual or the highest act of *one's own* unique and uniquely personal religion, which came about in the incessant prayer of the entire life lived by someone who

²⁶ "the only philosopher to my knowledge who, accepted—more or less—into the academic institution, author of more or less legitimate writings on Plato, Augustine, Descartes, Rousseau, Kant, Hegel, Husserl, Heidegger, Benjamin, Austin, will have dared describe his penis, as promised, in concise and detailed fashion, and as no one dared, in the Renaissance, paint the circumcised penis of Christ on the incredible pretext that there was no model for it."

²⁷ "...the mixture on this incredible supper of wine and blood, let people see it how I see it on my sex each time blood is mixed with sperm or the saliva of fellatio, describe my sex throughout thousands of years of Judaism, describe it (microscopy, photography, stereophototypy) until the paper breaks, make all the readers drool, wet lips, high and low, stretched out in their turn on the cushions, right on the knees of 'godfather' Elie."

is rightly considered to be an atheist and who can say the *omniprésence* of his God in *this* unique language, the language of circumcision where the word is being cut off.

This is nothing but phallocentrism of the most revealing, explicit, expressed kind. That is why critique of phallocentrism does not entail a choice between phallocentrism and its absence but between its naïve and hidden or concealed varieties, steering it into the very middle. It is pointless to ask whence it is; it simply is, just as the mother and the father, out of whom I am, are. Anyone may have forgotten this, save for a Jew, whose button is ritually torn from his shirt by a rabbi at the funeral of his father, both as a repetition of the circumcision and as a reaffirmation of his tie to the authority of the father. Derrida admits, abruptly, that this condensation of everything around the place of sex or gender is not his autobiographical peculiarity: all this is indeed my confession but, more than that, I am the confessor of others, probing their heavy mysteries, which I have unwillingly inherited.

What will happen when the super-goal is reached? Will the cut, circumcised writing end and the uncircumcised one begin? Will these realities ever recede, letting other ones to occupy the center? Perhaps, but which other ones? Will it become clear what circumcision is and what it signifies? How will the body change? Will the sign of circumcision be gone? What exactly is going on? Why did they attack the body, why this particular part of the body, from which the foreskin is cut? Why is it marked in such a deadly fashion? This is clearly castration, denoted in the most decisive fashion, isn't it? Or, is it, like a vaccine, the sign of an unconditional and decisive suspension of castration? In any case, this action openly points toward sex, the continuation of the genus—but, exactly, for what?

A person sees circumcision on himself, on *himself*. It may be that others have also undergone it, that it has touched not only him, but, like death itself, it still belongs only to him, who is not one of many. I am dying, and my death is not yet another one in a long line; it is not divided like labor among many. It is the same with circumcision, which is always my own and touches me not statistically but in the most intimate way imaginable. Speaking about it is the only genuinely interesting thing, but *to whom* to communicate and, above all, *what* to communicate besides saying that I am strongly and intimately touched in what is most shameful and most sensitive?

Phallocentrism, the phallus in the center of attention, is entwined with the woman and the mother in the imagination of a fantastical circumcision, where the exaggerated and hugely painful surgery, which causes all the entrails to fall out, coincides, at the same time, with the fellatio and the orgasm, so that the seed is mixed with blood, and intolerable pain—with equally intolerable jubilation.

This phallocentrism, escalated to the limit, demonstrates with utmost clarity its distinction from that of Aristotle, which is also complete-

ly clear. A double operation over the phallus, conducted by a woman, doubly makes it a theme, a question, a crying-out indeterminacy and unknowability. For Aristotle, the phallus is not a theme but a role, which implies taking leadership and historical initiative upon oneself. With the risk of making mistakes, to be sure. Derrida, however, does not undertake either the task of such decisive leadership or its risk.

Thus, here, the critique of phallogentrism is not at all a rejection of phallogentrism. On the contrary, the phallus appears in the center of attention as never before, and it does so, precisely, as matter for deconstruction. Circumcision is *not* understood as a vaccine against castration but as castration itself; Derrida disallows the circumcision of his own children. He is “the last Jew,” and Judaism ends with him. The disavowal of one’s own circumcision is a rejection of the self-assured, imperative gesture “it must be so.” It arises from a lack of understanding why “it must be so” and, in general, why anything whatsoever is an “absolute must.” Every mode of thinking, every purpose, is understood as a *construction* that needs to be sorted out or deconstructed [*razbirat*].

Without mentioning postmodernism in general, or deconstructivism in general, we ought to seek Jacques Derrida in these *woods*, outside metric space, where he insistently urges us to *return*, refusing to believe in the geometry of the wood(s) or in its cross. Now, when we are very close to a solution or to a hunch [*k razgadke ili dogadke*], which may not come to pass, it is especially important to abstain from nervous decisions, such as rejecting the masculine role. To reject the imperative gesture does not mean to reject the masculine role; the decision on the cessation of the tradition of circumcision is a one-time, enormous act, considering that it is believed that a Jew who has refused circumcision is doomed for the eternal *Gehenna*. Much like the decision to remain a Jew, while accommodating the God of St. Augustine, or choosing once and for all, with unconditional decisiveness, the life of prayers and tears. *Not* naming one’s God, keeping Him as a mystery, to which no one else has access—that, too, is a final, important gesture. Note that all of this entails courage and decisiveness, in which we discern the discipline of philosophy.

We have said that all genuine, tireless searches pass through the moment of *amechania*, of complete obscurity, dispersion, and distraction. Derrida’s relation to the word, to the text (and his word, containing *dif-férance*, falls apart into letters, is smelted into similar words or spellings: such transitions guide his thought) relies upon the moment of the word’s suspension. All of a sudden, on a spring morning of 1990, he sees a word as though for the first time (the word was “cascade”—“a cascade of troubles”—and everything begin with it). This happens quite often. And every time he senselessly, absently, and without understanding sees the word with the same absence of a minimum response, as his mother, who did not identify anyone, did not understand anything, and did not recognize her son nor responded to his greetings, in the last year of her life. Every time

this suspension of the word turned out to be—as it happened—the beginning of a new love, the discovery of new lands; and every time, when such suspension occurred, it was the beginning of a cascade, of love for *all* the words. One can neither arrange nor even hope for the coming to pass of the one and of the other, when a word suddenly falls out of the lexical net, becoming inaccessible in an event that is always unexpected.

It is the same with the word as with everything else. We have cited how everything, including literature, politics, and philosophy, ceases to exist, loses its appeal and significance. Like that word, everything is suspended in forlornness and deception that irritate, drive to the edge of despair and impatience. One cannot say anything; whatever you say will fall with deaf, useless stupidity on the ground. Exactly this, and only this, moment of powerlessness suddenly and all by itself grows into a completely fresh raptness, replete with interest to everything in the world, toward all the things, language, literature, philosophy. Then, as though struck by a kind of incommunicable happiness and losing the capacity to speak, he writes:

...je n'ai rencontre personne, je n'ai eu dans l'histoire de l'humanité idée de personne, attendez, attendez, personne qui ait été plus heureux que moi, et chanceux, euphorique, c'est vrai a priori, n'est-ce pas, ivre de jouissance ininterrompue, haec omnia uidemus et bona sunt ualde, quoniam tu ea uides in nobis (Bennington & Derrida 1993: 268).²⁸

Such an admission of another gaze, that of God, who can see through us what He saw in the very beginning of a fresh Creation, is made possible by letting go, by the emptiness of the suspension, and again by a *decisive* adoption of forlornness, in order to be “*constamment [sic] triste, privé, destitué, déçu, impatient, jaloux, désespéré, négatif et névrosé*” (Bennington & Derrida 1993: 268).²⁹

Thrownness, emptiness, *amechania* are not mere accidents but the first and the main reality. *It is unclear* why the mother threw the child into the world, why she did not leave him by her side, why she expelled him to a harsh school and did not keep him at home. And yet, she also retained the conserving and salvational heredity

...car ses capacités de silence et d'amnésie sont ce que je partage le mieux au monde, rien à dire, voilà ce qu'ils ne supportent pas, que je ne dise rien, jamais rien qui tienne ou qui vaille, aucune thèse qu'on puisse réfuter, ni vrai

²⁸ “I do not know anyone, I have not met anyone, I have had in the history of humanity no idea of anyone, wait, wait, anyone who has been happier than I, and luckier, euphoric, this is a priori true, isn't it? drunk with uninterrupted enjoyment, we have seen *all of this* and all this is very good, *because you see this in us.*”

²⁹ “...constantly sad, deprived, destitute, disappointed, impatient, jealous, desperate, negative, and neurotic.”

ni faux, pas même, pas vus pas pris, ce n'est pas une stratégie mais la violence du vide par où Dieu se terre à mort en moi. (Bennington & Derrida 1993: 272).³⁰

In an all-round defense, they do not capitulate. Hence, out of this inaccessible cement of silence, is everything, and one cannot reach Derrida as one could not reach his mother, who had never read a line of his text nor peeked into any of his books, in the state of forgetting that preceded her death.

La puissance inoubliable de mes discours tient à ce qu'ils broient tout jusqu'à la cendre muette dont on ne retient alors que le nom, à peine le mien, tout cela tournant autour de rien, d'un Rien où Dieu se rappelle à moi, c'est ma seule mémoire (Bennington & Derrida 1993: 273).³¹

One of the tricks of deaf silence: to speak of the tragic with unperurbed coldness, having surrounded the word with quotation marks and grammatically deconstructing it.

Who, on earth, am I and what do they want from me? I am a little Jew, who, upon being born, did not understand anything, and who still did not understand at the age of twelve, when, despite his excellent results, he was expelled from a school in Algeria. What for? Nor is his place in the European French school; he belongs to Africa; let his language be Hebrew or Arabic. In 1981 he is arrested in Prague and thrown into jail, allegedly for trafficking drugs. What could lend firm support, what does not slip away between that expulsion and this jail, or, broader still, between birth, being thrown into the cold or into the unknown, and death? Where am I between necessity and contingency? What in me is necessary and what is contingent? But, after all, I do not know what is what, while around me everything is full of such knowledge, from the certainty of Algeria's French colonial administration that a Jew must know his proper place, to the certainty of the Czechoslovak authorities that a Frenchman should not be allowed to give an unauthorized seminar in Prague. Just like the certainty of the hand that was raised, holding a knife, in order to cut off a part of the infant's body. All around, everything is full of *logos*, reasons, meanings,

³⁰ "...for her capacities for silence and amnesia are what I share best, no arguing with that, that's what they can't stand, that I say nothing, never anything tenable or valid, no thesis that could be refuted, neither true nor false, not even, not seen not caught, it is not a strategy but the violence of the void through which God goes to earth to death in me."

³¹ "[T]he unforgettable power of [my] discourses hangs on the fact that they grind everything including the mute ash whose name alone one then retains, scarcely mine, all that turning around nothing, a Nothing in which God reminds me of him, that's my only memory."

and everything invites one to consider them, to think through, and to agree. He is already almost agreeing. He, himself, is ready to consider, to think, and to acknowledge.

Translated by Michael Marder

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