



# The Proximity of the Wood(s)

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When Artemy Magun invited me to participate in the conference celebrating the seventy-fifth anniversary of Vladimir Bibikhin’s birth, I did not have a shadow of a doubt. I knew that I had to discuss *The Wood(s)*.<sup>1</sup> Why this book in particular? After several years of work on the philosophy of vegetal life, this theme is incredibly close to me. But, besides such accidental proximity between Bibikhin’s seminar and my plant-thinking, there were also other reasons behind my decision. “The wood” or “the woods” is the first beginning, anticipating the Aristotelian conception of matter and, therefore, to a certain extent, the extra-philosophical source of philosophy. When all is said and done, we don’t and can’t talk about

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<sup>1</sup> Every quotation in this text refers to this long seminar published in Russian as *Les (hylē): The Problem of Matter, History of the Concept, and Living Matter in Ancient and Contemporary Biology* (St. Petersburg: Nauka, 2011). While this monumental seminar of Bibikhin has not yet appeared in English, plans are under way for its translation. All translations of the original citations are my own. It is worth noting that the Russian *les*, like the Greek *hylē*, has more than one sense: it can refer both to the forest and to wood, understood as construction materials. That is why, in this translation, I have rendered it as wood(s), preserving the ambiguous interplay of the singular and the plural, as well as a living ecosystem and dead matter, implied in *les*.

anything other than that, even if it seems to us that we are discussing something quite distant from the wood(s). Expressing this idea in Bibikhin's language, let us say that we are captivated by the first beginning. We speak of nothing else but this beginning, even though the wood(s) is not at all a theme, but only the possibility of thematizing (everything). Narrowing it down to a theme, we lose that which we thematize, disrupt the "silence of the woods" (Bibikhin 2011: 52), and, by the same token, get lost, as though in a dark, impassable, lightless forest. Hence my first hypothesis: it makes no sense to talk about the wood(s) *as such* and it is only worth contemplating its/their proximity.

The question is not what wood or matter is, but, rather, how close they are, since it is not a "what" but a "how" that defines the phenomenological method, to which Bibikhin often resorts. He clearly understands that, with reference to the wood(s), the classical philosophical question *what is...? ti esti*, is unfitting. Moreover, this formulation of the question does not pay sufficient respect to the non-philosophical (wooden) source of philosophy. If we were to seriously pose this question, any possible answer to it would be self-contradictory. The wood(s) is/are not equal to itself or to themselves. It is/they are both less and more than the wood(s)—matter on the one hand; material on the other—that is/are both living and dead, the growing trees and lumber, flora and fauna (Bibikhin 2011: 143), something that is one's own and radically alien. It would be pointless to expect that the wood(s) would obey the exigencies of formal logic. The wood(s) has/have preexisted formalized thought and will exist long after it is/they are gone, despite all its/their efforts to the contrary. The forest and lumber have their own *logos*, which is speechless, that is to say, internally contradictory from the standpoint of formal logic, since one of the key semantic overtones of the Greek word *logos* is "voice," or "speech." The wood(s) is/are defined only by its/their indefiniteness (Bibikhin 2011: 116), which is why it has/they have always already slipped from our hands.

So, what should we do with the proximity of the wood(s)? Does proximity, too, coincide with remoteness? The wood(s) expel(s) us from metric space to non-metric geometry, Bibikhin suggests (5, *et passim*). This means that the proximity of the wood(s), much like our proximity to the wood(s), does not imply our situatedness somewhere on the margins or outskirts. It does not refer, for instance, to the fact that I was born and lived at the edge of the National Forest Park *Losinyi Ostrov* [Moose Island] in Moscow. Instead, we have in view that proximity, which remains immeasurable, incommensurable with objective distance between any two given points in abstract space. Such proximity is felt (and this is more than a random example) between two close people, no matter how geographically distant they might be one from the other. It is not difficult to guess that Bibikhin's proximity of the wood(s) is existential; in it, we might discern the features of existence, described by Martin Heidegger, among others.

Returning to the wood(s), Bibikhin joins the company not only of Aristotle but also that of the early Heidegger, who places *Leben*, life, in the spot later to be occupied by Dasein (82). It is Heidegger who sifts the ancient doctrine of the animation of matter and the modern doctrine of matter's sensitivity (for instance, in Schelling) through the fundamental ontology of Dasein. "The insufficiently understood intensiveness [...] of the wood(s)' presence" is not understood, precisely, because the hidden aspect of presence does not reside in the readiness-to-hand, or availability, of materials made of wood, nor, of course, in their presence-at-hand, but in the fact that the wood(s) *exist(s)*, actively leading an existence. The wood(s) and matter are close to us, in that they, much like us (or, better yet: we, like them; or even: we, through them) are *Dasein*.

Let us think through the formulation, "the insufficiently understood intensiveness of its presence." In the insufficiency, there is a share of what *is* or *can be* understood. We are by far not mistaken, when we apperceive the wood(s) and matter as materials. It is impossible to get rid of readiness-to-hand and presence-at-hand once and for all. Just like the bodily presence of the human Dasein, the presence of the wood(s) intertwines these modalities of being with being's non-objectivity, that is to say, with life itself. Existence depends on its incomplete—forever incomplete!—transformation into a realized project. Matter, to a significant extent, supplies the materials, or the building blocks, for such a realization. Vegetative growth is the best illustration of matter's self-organization, essentially linked to dying away. A tree strives up, grows up from a fragile shoot, and becomes stronger, thanks to its becoming stone-like on the outside. It relies on the remains of its own nutritive process, living on its dying away, and it nourishes itself, among other things, on its own waste—for instance, fallen leaves or acorns that have rotten away into compost. In a similar sense, we, humans, rely on our world, taken in the existential sense of the word, looking for support in the results of the dying away, which is ours, human, and that of the wood(s), transformed into construction materials. Except that in the process of constructing our world we forget that that from which we are building—both matter itself and the labor of the bygone generations—has also created and, in some sense, continues to create its world around and within us. "Our relation to the wood(s) continues to be intimate," writes Bibikhin (Bibikhin 2011: 14). Against the backdrop of an existential construal of matter/wood(s), it is crucial to conceive of this intimacy as an approximation of two worlds—not from the outside, but from the inside, since the orbit of our world rotates within the womb of matter.

If we are within the wood(s), as within the womb of a mother or of matter, then we cannot distance ourselves from it too much. Bibikhin tirelessly repeats: matter is not what stands-against but is the under-lying (Bibikhin 2011: 83); in other words, it is not an object but a subject, "the under-lying [pod-lezhaschee], which is open to [podlezhit]—a determina-

tion” (Bibikhin 2011: 111). Here is, right before us, another proof of an existential approach to matter. Its proximity is felt from below; it belongs to all projects as their base and unsurpassable beginning. Still, “the under-lying” could be more accurately called substance (*sub-stance*: what stands-under). In the subject, the prevalent trajectory is that of a throw, which augurs the kind of risk when one is thrown for real, without any security or insurance, as Bibikhin puts it (Bibikhin 2011: 230). Thrown matter does not impart to us the stability, which we associate with the under-lying base. The throw—of matter and us—is one and the same. We are thrown with it and in it, though in our cogitation (or maybe in any cogitation, in cogitation as such) the trajectory of the throw is split into two opposite paths, more or less distant one from the other. Here, proximity should in no way be interpreted as a new approximation of subjective and objective trajectories after a long period of their “alienation,” say, from nature. The wood(s) and matter are colored, in Bibikhin’s philosophy, with the tones of Dasein, while our thrownness with them is but a small portion of one and the same event.

Still, the proximity of the wood(s), determined from below, is quite misleading. The forest does not strive up and away, as though to a separate and far off sphere of ideas, but to itself, to the fullness of its existence. Let us not be surprised by such confusion: the wood(s), according to Bibikhin, force(s) humans to lose their orientation (Bibikhin 2011: 21), and, hence, to conflate right and left, before and behind, above and below. Without this latter orientational marker, metaphysics cannot make but one step. All that is left is the middle, again symbolized by the tree, which, as Bibikhin notes, “lives on the edge of itself” and “grows both up and down.” To exist means to be in the midst of the wood(s), in the middle, which we have not left, regardless of the direction, in which we are moving. And the wood(s) itself or themselves remain(s) in the middle of itself or themselves, which is why it/they live(s) “somehow by itself/themselves” and “can be the other” (Bibikhin 2011: 81). The same middle, already found in the tree from which the cross is made, reappears at the intersection of the *axis mundi* conceived as the horizontal tree of life and the vertical tree of knowledge (Bibikhin 2011: 71). And so, on the formal level, the proximity of the wood(s) means the proximity of everything to everything, residing in the middle, at the heart of existence.

For now, I would like to leave to one side the image of the cross, derived from Saint Augustine, for whom it was a symbol of spiritual matter, as much as the intentional “rendering-wild” of the concept of matter that used to rely on the allegory of a garden within a garden, cultivated by Leibniz. Our goal is to appreciate the proximity of the wood(s) not only in its formal but also in its fully existential sense. Bibikhin’s wood(s) exert(s) psychotropic effects upon us. Outwardly pushed away, it “eats into us” in the form of tobacco, wine, and narcotics (Bibikhin 2011: 24). The modern city cannot escape this predicament. Literally, psycho-tropism means a

turn or a conversion of the soul. Toward what do the remains of the wood(s) in the city turn our souls? I am sure that, if we were to ask Bibikhin himself, he would have responded, "Toward the body!" Rather than ward us off from matter, the body immerses us into it, up to the ears, as the saying goes. The body, actually, is a synecdoche of the wood(s), that is, a part of matter, which replaces the whole, wherein it participates. I quote:

Together with my proximate one, the body [...], the entire world wood(s) is given to me, the wood(s), into which it grows along with other bodies, with which it is linked essentially in the same manner as parts of one body are bound to one another (Bibikhin 2011: 51).

Proximity to the body passes into proximity to all the other bodies and, then, to proximity to the wood(s). With Bibikhin, we find ourselves again climbing up something that resembles "the ladder of love" from Plato's *Symposium*, except that this new path is neither vertical nor horizontal (we do not know the direction of our movement anymore) and it points not toward the idea of beauty but toward the indeterminacy of matter.

The barely tolerable proximity to the wood(s), to the body, where every cell is already a kind of forest ("a forest within a forest," as a variation on the Leibnizian theme of "a garden within a garden")—this proximity is the product of the immeasurability, the incommensurability, and non-metric nature of space in the forest. Matter is not chaos. Only when order is entirely associated with abstract and rational ordering, does matter appear before us as a bacchanalia, as a "blaze" (Bibikhin 2011: 24), into which we throw ourselves, or as "substance," in which it is easy to drown (Bibikhin 2011: 26). Once again, in matter, we have zero stability: before, in the throw, the element of air was prevalent; now, we also have no firm ground under our feet, but only fire and water.

We, those who come from or live in a city, are simultaneously too far from and too close to the wood(s). In any case, everything is ruled by excess, by that "too much," which breaks into our seemingly orderly world and tears us out of it. That which gives the world, that from which everything in the world is made, takes away our sense of stability, eating into us. The obverse side of the proximity of the wood(s) is our exit from ourselves, ec-stasis. The wood(s) provoke(s), prompt(s) us take a leave of ourselves, and, therefore, to become more similar to it or to them (recall that the wood(s) is/are other; in them or in it "another we is present...—we with another consciousness" (Bibikhin 2011: 24)). And an exit from ourselves implies an entry into time. That which presses us out of ourselves is, precisely, existence in the full sense of Dasein.

Before moving on, it's worth demarcating an extremely important difference between the thought of Heidegger, whose lexicon I have been constantly (I would say, shamelessly) using, and the philosophy of Bibikhin. For the former, an abyss lies between the human and other living organ-

isms, such as plants and animals, not to mention inanimate objects, such as stones. The name of this abyss is *existence*. According to Heidegger, a stone is but does not exist, even as existence irreversibly rolls down and falls into the world of matter. For Bibikhin, on the contrary, “matter feels everything, but it does so as though in a dream; life happens when matter awakens” (Bibikhin 2011: 184). The wood(s) is/are already not so far from us.

*Lichtung*, where the Heideggerian being is received and understood, is nothing but a small meadow in the woods, an opening, and a patch that is open. This means that the trees have left at least some empty space amongst them and let light (*Licht*) through, shedding it on a part of the dark wood(s) and matter. Bibikhin, in his turn, does not resort to such a crypto-idealist trick. His wood(s) not only “surround(s) us tightly” but also grow(s) on us, in us, and as us: “We are surrounded by the wood(s) from all sides, in a tight embrace, and that which appears to us to be intimately ours, our thought, is not in a better condition than our actual bodies. The wood(s) has/have always had time to close up” (Bibikhin 2011: 326). The proximity is so proximate that it appropriates for itself and absorbs into itself everything that is “intimately ours.” The wood(s) of Bibikhin is/are without an opening, because no foreign light passes through, even though a certain glow emanates from it or from them as a consequences of burning, understood as life, as combustible materials, and so forth.

Heidegger’s opening distances us from the wood(s) and from ourselves. Against his overt intentions, the tendency of the *Lichtung* is toward the widening of openness and to the annihilation of the hidden element that makes it possible. An open patch turns into a broader clearing, and the clearing paves the way to further deforestation, until it becomes clear, in this striving to a common clarity, that, in the words of Bibikhin “people are preparing a desert for themselves” (Bibikhin 2011: 53). In this context, the desert, at once, is an open physical space (where, by the way, it is as difficult to orient oneself as in the forest) and the unlimited openness as the realization of the innermost dream nurtured by all idealisms: to endow matter with a mind, without leaving an untamed remainder behind. If we look at this situation closer, we will see that in our “late” civilization there is a struggle between total idealization and those rests of the wood(s), those shreds of matter, which Bibikhin concentrated in three words: coca, tobacco, and wine. To clear the forest does not ideally cleanse us of fallen matter, but, to the contrary, clutters the world and ourselves with its remains. The proximity of the wood(s) is also not the originary innocence, distinguishing the mythical *bon sauvage* (an idea sometimes wrongly attributed to Rousseau). In the spirit of post-metaphysical thought, this proximity facilitates our self-recognition in the rests of the wood(s), in its byproducts, and the most foul-smelling at that, leading to catastrophic levels of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere and to global warming. The “throw” of existentialism has been for a long time bereft of

any *pathos*. It should be translated today in no other way than “throwing-out,” a consignment to garbage of ourselves along with the shreds of the wood(s) that still remain. If we are to believe Bibikhin, Aristotle vaguely foresaw this, when he thought of the earth as a “dump,” where everything minimally heavy falls.

It was not by chance that I drew your attention to the nearly complete identity between us and the wood(s), or, if you wish, between the shreds of the wood(s) and ourselves as its or their byproducts. “That is how,” it will be said, “the dream of idealism turns into an absolute nightmare.” But we are concerned with something else, namely the proximity of the wood(s). What kind of approximation is this, that it can be conflated with complete identification?

Here is what I think: we are the proximity of the wood(s) to itself or to themselves. In us, matter seems to awaken absolutely and, having awakened, makes sense of itself. But—summing up with the support of Hegel—like any positivity handed over to be brutalized by consciousness, it negates itself. In us, through us, the wood(s) come(s) close not to this or that object but to itself or to themselves, and, at the apogee of this approximation or self-approximation, suddenly recede(s), undergoing destruction. The cutting down of the earth’s forests and the growing of the desert are the signs and, at the same time, the direct consequences of their becoming-conscious. We stand and fall together with the wood(s), and it or they also stand(s) and fall(s) together with us.

Such is the interconnection of the throw (more precisely, of the “thrownness”) of the wood(s) and ourselves, which I have mentioned more than once above. In this interconnection, we find two ostensibly opposed hypotheses. On the one hand, we discover the overwhelming influence of matter that appropriates the human to itself: “What remains of the human, when he entirely drowns in the wood(s)?” (Bibikhin 2011: 144). Evidently, nothing. On the other hand, the wood(s) is/are handed over to the inexorable force of a destructive ideal. Paraphrasing Bibikhin’s question, we obtain: What remains of the wood(s) when it or they dissolve(s) entirely in the human? However, allow me to ask, how did we end up with two sides, and especially with two opposite sides? We have already learned that there are no oppositions there. So, what is going on? The swallowing up, the destruction, the cutting down of the wood(s) by humans is the swallowing up, the destruction, the cutting down of the wood(s) by the wood(s). Following Bibikhin, note that in this disappearance, much like in the burning of fuel, the wood(s) is or are still close to us—openly and negatively (Bibikhin 2011: 364). And, on the verge of non-being, the wood(s), is/are always striving toward being, maintaining proximity to itself or to themselves as other. Hence, we find ourselves right in the epicenter of the strangest—*unheimlich*—proximity of the wood(s).

Bibikhin agrees with Heidegger’s thesis that a human being is “indefinite” and therefore “open,” though he rejoins that “that, with which



human deal in the first instance in themselves and on earth is the indefinite, the wood(s)” (Bibikhin 2011: 26). There is no momentous difference between the indefiniteness of human existence and the existence of the entire earth. All forms of life are the dimensions of the wood(s)’ own indefiniteness. The proximity of the wood(s) consists in this, namely that a human is but one of its open, still unrealized possibilities. In the philosophy of Bibikhin, instead of a clearing in the wood(s), we encounter the wood(s) as a clearing, an opening *and* a closure of existence, of humans and not only. Light does not descend upon the forest, there where it is less dense, but, instead, emanates from it without external interference. That is how the peculiar phenomenality of a speechless *logos*, which I touched upon at the outset of my commentary, manifests itself. The wood(s) cannot be thematized, precisely because the ensuing theme would disrupt its or their speechlessness, occlude its or their own light and, in doing so, destroy it or them as a phenomenon.

Perhaps, the word *proximity* is still too positive for a description of our relation to the wood(s), in the absence of “a language that could be used to speak of” it or of them. Well, if there is no such language, then it is up to us to invent it, while keeping in mind that every attempt at such an invention will turn out to be a failure. And that’s what Bibikhin does. But, within the scheme of existence, failure and success are relative terms: possibilities prevail over their passage into actuality, which is why success as realization hardly counts at all. We might either lose all hope and acknowledge the fruitlessness of efforts at translating the speechlessness of the wood(s) into human languages, or learn to approach the wood(s) not straight on, but through roundabout paths, relying on a negative form of proximity as “dis-tancing,” that is “the removal of distance” (Bibikhin 2011: 82).

Dis-tancing, or de-distancing, *Ent-fernung*, is of course Heidegger’s term, describing in the first place the creation of a phenomenological world. Creating their world, and therefore themselves, humans overcome the non-physical distance between themselves and parts of their surroundings by giving different parts meaning and sense, putting them in their places around us. (That is why Bibikhin asserts that humans are essentially placeless or unsuitable [*neumestnyi*]; assigning places to everything and everyone else, they do not occupy a determinate position in the semantic web, which they spin like spiders.) Still, the dis-tancing that creates the world presupposes an earlier dis-tancing, at the same time removing and preserving the distance between us and the wood(s). In this dis-tancing of the wood(s) from us, the entire world unfolds. Thus, we might finally breathe freely, rather than suffocating in the dense rows upon rows of living beings. But, as soon as we draw the long-awaited breath of freedom, we realize that the humans, together with non-physical distance between them and the wood(s), opened by dis-tancing, still pertain to the wood(s). The difference between us and the wood(s) unfurls, strange as it might sound, in the wood(s).



The very fact that the world is not created at will but is given beforehand (through language, a tradition, and so forth) for a further interpretation testifies to its status as a secondary material for active sense-making. In its capacity as materials, the world is also matter, a separated part of the wood(s), often unaware of its origins or belonging. Human captivation by the world is nothing else than a trace of the wood(s) in our psyche:

The origins of everything living and of the human should be sought very close by, in our captivation by the world, which is no different in our case than in the case of everything that lives and is no different now than in the beginning of everything (Bibikhin 2011: 361).

Captivation introduces an element of passivity into any human activity; its psychotropic effects are no weaker than those of narcotics. It turns out that the world does not completely belong to us, but that we belong to it, and, through it, to the wood(s).

The interplay of distance and proximity, without a modicum of opposition between the two, happens in the notion of dis-tancing. Everything depends on how we hear this word. If it signifies a transformation of the wood(s) (“the wood(s) will transform itself or themselves” (Bibikhin 2011: 102)), then we will obtain a cross at the intersection of the trees of life and knowledge; if it means alienation from nature, then the outlines of a more abstract scheme of the cross emerge under the heading of “culture.” In any event, it will be impossible to escape from the wood(s), because it or they redouble(s), imbibing even seeming opposites and, with this, reflecting the life process of a plant that “lets through, takes into itself much of what does not necessarily belong to it” (Bibikhin 2011: 247). Like a single plant that admits into itself an excess of moisture, the wood(s) let(s) us into itself or into themselves—us: that superfluous, surplus, thrown-out part that negates it or them. And, again like a single plant, the wood(s) double(s) up, following the logic of Emile Durkheim’s *Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. Recall how, in that book, one tree is not one thing but two; it is both a tree and “mana,” the enchanting force of life and the object of worship in ancient shamanism and animism. That is, the tree is at the same time a plant and something else, namely a sign over and above itself. In Bibikhin’s thought we encounter something similar in the so-called “riddle of the wood(s),” “in which—in this riddle—a tree redoubles as the tree and the cross. Polarity enters the course of life itself...” (Bibikhin 2011: 249). It does not matter at all which of the two poles we are approximating. The riddle of the wood(s) is that, despite all our vacillations between the tree and the cross, the thing and the sign, “nature” and “culture,” we still remain in a proximate dis-tancing from it or from them.

The redoubling of the wood(s) prompts us to correct our interpretation of non-metric space. At first, it appeared to us that Bibikhin had merely resorted to a variation on the theme of phenomenological reduc-

tion in Husserl and its modification by Heidegger. The Russian thinker announces this himself, speaking of a return to a prior geometry (Bibikhin 2011: 66), which is “ontological, or that of being.” “This,” he continues, “is genuine philosophy. It immediately and radically thrusts us into a field of real difficulties. Right away, it returns to the wood(s), to the tree, to matter, to the cross. From the ideal to the material” (Bibikhin 2011: 224). Since we are already talking about difficulties, then, indeed, these abide. The trouble [*zagvozdka*], like a nail [*gvozd'*] on the cross, resides in the fact that there is no direct route from the ideal “back” to the material. It is impossible to come close to materiality as such. In the best of cases, we will reach the redoubled wood(s), already splintered into trees and crosses, things and signs. The redoubling of the wood(s) draws our attention to ideality or spirituality, which is inseparable from the material, as St. Augustine once did, featuring in his sermons the image of the cross as a boat, constructed of wood and keeping the sinner afloat in the stormy sea of seductions. The wood of the cross, without a doubt, represents light or sublime matter, saturated with spirit. In contrast to the inorganic, stony, heavy Law of the Old Testament, which, according to this logic, draws us to the bottom of the sea, the wood facilitates the rebirth of matter itself—of the wood(s)—in spirit, without losing the qualities of matter. In Bibikhin’s work, a similar conclusion is based on his categorical refusal to ascribe a kind of banal dualism to Plato. *Eidos* is the very fullness of the wood(s), which, in the contemporary understanding, is perverted into the genetic code, into “the other program, the schedule of our genetics” (Bibikhin 2011: 352), and, therefore, into a different ideality of the material.

And, finally, a concluding thought—this time on the subject of attention, for which I am very grateful to you, my listeners and readers. How does one pay attention if its object is redoubled? In trying to see the tree, we are distracted from the cross, and vice versa. The wood(s) include(s) both of these moments at once—both moments that, despite their non-oppositionality, cannot be embraced by the same gaze. Attention dissipates even at the highest level of its concentration; it can never be as “pure” as phenomenology wishes it to be. The wood(s) is/are somewhere very close and quite far away. So, exactly in this approach to attention, I part ways with Bibikhin, though I give him the final word: “As the wood(s), we are creatures. But as pure attention, we are divine. It is then that we do with the wood(s) exactly the same thing as the one willed by God” (Bibikhin 2011: 50).

## Bibliography

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