

Vladimir Bibikhin

The Woods

(Edited by Artemy Magun; Translated by Arch Tait)

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A popular internet meme features a disgruntled looking cat positioned to look as if she has just finished reading Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, with the caption reading 'It doesn't say anything about killing mockingbirds at all!'. I confess that when first choosing this book for review, it was largely with a particular set of personal research expectations about the symbolism of forests, a topic on which I was seeking a particular angle, and I was initially a little disappointed as it became apparent that the volume was going to have a related but different focus from that anticipated. But like the cat supposedly disappointed by the writing of Harper Lee, I would be doing the book's contents and merits a considerable injustice if I judged the work only by what was unexpectedly missing from it.

The Woods is the first book by the Russian philosopher Vladimir Bibikhin to be translated into English, and it covers a very wide area of intellectual ground. A talented linguist with command of several languages, Bibikhin (1938–2004) is widely regarded in his homeland as the most significant Soviet/Russian philosopher of the later twentieth century, but his books (including this one) were usually the published version of lecture courses that he taught, and were organised around a particular theme that Bibikhin would then examine from multiple angles. In addition to the sophistication and range of Bibikhin's thought, some complexity is unavoidably added by the fact that in the Soviet era from which he emerged, the separation of Russian thought from that of the West was reinforced and exacerbated by Cold War restrictions on the flow of information, so most Anglophone readers will inevitably be grappling both with unfamiliar root notions, such as those drawn from Russian Orthodox theology, and with the influence of these ideas on Bibikhin's reading of more familiar figures such as Heidegger and Wittgenstein. It is therefore just as well that Arch Tait's translation renders Bibikhin's Russian text into quite readable if conceptually dense English, while the editor Artemy Magun gives invaluable context to the work by providing both a helpful Foreword and a concluding glossary of key terms in Bibikhin's thought. The Foreword is also of assistance in situating Bibikhin's politics: though supportive of the moves to democratisation and liberalism of the Gorbachev/Yeltsin era, there is a clear cultural conservatism in his Russian Orthodox Christianity, which shows itself most obviously within the volume in Bibikhin's antipathy to feminism and his apparent belief in biologically based gender roles and sexual polarities.

The book itself is structured as a set of 32 lectures that Bibikhin gave between 2nd September 1997 and 26th May 1998, and is based around the

concept of the forest, of wood and woods, and more specifically *hyle*, the Attic Greek term with these meanings that was vital to Aristotle's philosophy, where it is most often equated with 'matter' or 'substance'. Bibikhin uses the term not merely as a starting point but as a focal point, moving out from this origination and returning to it after a range of enquiries: examining its significance in Aristotle's thought, discussing the phenomenological and spiritual dimensions of being lost in, surrounded by and transformed by experiences in the forest, looking at the ways in which the forest represents primordial nature of a sort that continues to follow and shape us, locating the notion of *hyle* in relation to ideas of fire, of natural spontaneity and of law, and expanding the idea most broadly into a wider analysis of the very idea of biological life, its operations and its dynamism. Bibikhin's breadth of concerns, his manner of working through and around a nest of conceptual intertwinings, may be inferred from just a few of the early connections he draws in relation to the forest: not only is it to be 'found in the philosophical concept of *hyle* (matter) in religion and theology (the Cross as World Tree) and in poetry (the images of the tree, the bush and the garden' (p. 1), but it also surrounds us as 'our main modern fuel' from 'prehistoric "floating forests"' (p. 6), as 'something primal, as matter, as something maternal' (p. 11), something with transformative capacities that may 'act like a drug' upon us (p. 12), even something that may avenge itself upon us, since Bibikhin does 'not think it unreasonable to see tobacco, wine and drugs as the forest's revenge' (p. 14). We should thus not be surprised at the complex path trodden in the volume. In the first 16 lectures alone we move through the forest as multiply defined by reference to humanity, the connection to the forest as engaged with in Russian Orthodox mysticism, the connections to the Cross, to Aristotelian biology and the significance of parthogenesis, to *eidos* (form) as conceived of by Aristotle and by Plato, to Derrida's account of phallogocentrism, to Lev Berg's challenges against reductive Darwinism, and on to the relationship of matter to concepts of purpose and teleology in living beings. As with Heidegger, by whom Bibikhin was significantly influenced, the writing takes serpentine routes around the topic while trying to leave little ground untouched, though to his credit Bibikhin largely steers clear of Heidegger's tendencies to obscurantism.

Bibikhin is well aware of the ecological dangers which a high tech, consumerist modern humanity has unleashed, recognising that it 'is possible that with us the chain of life with its billions of years of history will be broken' (p. 345), but this is not his primary interest here. Rather, the second half of the book builds upon the first, primarily in relation to philosophy of biology. Though far too scientifically aware to support figures like the creationists, whom he calls 'farcical' (p. 187), Bibikhin draws on a range of thinkers and ideas – Berg, Lorenz, Tinbergen, neo-Lamarckianism – to advance an account of life that is compatible with evolutionary science but is resistant to its reductionist excesses. For Bibikhin, the Aristotelian notion of the *automaton*,

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associated not with the robotic activity of machines but with its near opposite – spontaneous, even playful, self-initiated action – is intertwined with the Russian theological notion of *Sophia*, denoting the corporeal, existential aspect of Spirit: ‘in everything we do there is a side we know about and manage, and another side which is our mimetic participation in Sophia to the extent that we belong to it’ (p. 248). In a manner somewhat reminiscent of thinkers such as Victor Frankl and William James, Bibikhin is adamant that what is most important to humanity does not reduce to basic Darwinian drives, and interestingly he rejects any easy anthropocentrism in this area: ‘the survival of the human species is linked to meaningfulness, and there is no reason to suppose things are any different for the rest of the living world, except that there we more often talk about a goal’, he maintains, insisting that meaningfulness ‘is no less important *biologically* than bread’ (p. 225, emphasis in original). This is a sort of vibrant philosophy of biology, in which dynamic spontaneity links with unfolding Spirit, the forest with the Cross, to create a distinctive vision of the human place within the wider natural and theological order.

In my view Polity deserve considerable credit for commissioning a translation of the work of this important thinker, who was clearly a scholar of immense distinction and originality. Though the book’s appeal may be largely to philosophers of biology or of religion and to historians of ideas rather than to environmental ethicists, Bibikhin’s perspective will also interest thinkers inclined to anti-reductionist forms of naturalism.

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