



LOSTOLOGY OF RUSSIAN CULTURE

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Throughout history, landscapes have not only shaped the physical world but also the cultural psychology of various countries. Among these landscapes, the forests hold a special position, particularly in Russia, where the vast and boundless nature is inseparable from the collective psychology of the Russian people. In Russian culture, the forest is not only a physical landscape but also a profound cultural and psychological symbol, reflecting a deep rooted “forest complex” in the national psyche of a heavily forested country. The phenomenon of “getting lost” in the Russian forest, a recurring motif in literature and folklore, transcends mere physical disorientation to become a metaphor for existential and spiritual exploration. By synthesizing insights from Russian literature and cultural narratives, this article examines how the forest serves as a liminal space where individuals confront their deepest fears, desires, and uncertainties, revealing themes of self-discovery, identity, and the tension between civilization and wilderness. Furthermore, it connects the symbolism of getting lost in the forest with contemporary social issues, such as environmental degradation and the existential disorientation of modern life, highlighting the enduring significance of the forest as a cultural archetype and its role in shaping the Russian psyche. Through an interdisciplinary approach, this article offers insights into the universal human experience of disorientation and its broader cultural implications, providing a understanding of the complex relationships between people and society, as well as between humanity and nature. In the forest, as in life, the paths we take are often uncertain, and the destinations we seek may remain forever out of reach. It is in the act of wandering, of confronting the unknown, that we find the possibility of our transformation and renewal.

Keywords: Russian forest landscape culture, human-nature interactions, contemporary Russian society, Russian literature, Russian folklore.

На протяжении всей истории человечества естественные ландшафты формировали не только физический мир, но и культурную психологию разных стран. Среди этих ландшафтов особое место занимают леса, и особенно в России, с ее огромными лесными массивами. В русской культуре лес является не только физическим ландшафтом, но и важнейшим символом, отражающим глубоко укорененный «лесной комплекс» в национальном самосознании страны с обширными лесными массивами. Феномен «блуждания в лесу», повторяющийся мотив в литературе и фольклоре, выходит за рамки простой физической дезориентации, становясь метафорой экзистенциального и духовного поиска. Обобщая идеи из русской литературы и культурных нарративов, автор статьи показывает, как лес служит лиминальным пространством, где люди сталкиваются со своими глубочайшими страхами, желаниями и сомнениями, и таким образом раскрывает темы самопознания, идентичности и конфликта между цивилизацией и дикой природой. Кроме того, он связывает символику блуждания в лесу с современными социальными проблемами, такими как деградация окружающей среды и экзистенциальная дезориентация современной жизни, подчеркивая непреходящее значение леса как культурного архетипа и его роль в формировании «русской души». Используя междисциплинарный подход, автор делает широкие культурологические обобщения и выдвигает гипотезу о наличии универсального человеческого опыта «потерянности», влияющего на культуры народов и обеспечивающего понимание сложных отношений между людьми и обществом, а также между человечеством и природой.

Ключевые слова: русская лесная ландшафтная культура, взаимодействие человека и природы, современное российское общество, русская литература, русский фольклор.

Introduction

This article explores the conceptual term of lostology, a neologism combining “lost” with the suffix “-ology” to signify a systematic inquiry into disorientation, while the term originates from Christian evangelistic discourse, particularly in the work of John Kramp. John Kramp defines “lostology” as “the study of being lost and what that experience can teach Christians about evangelism” [13]. While the term etymologically gestures toward Christian evangelistic discourses on spiritual wandering, this study adapts it to explore the broader cultural, psychological, and existential dimensions of disorientation. By embarking on this exploration to uncover the joys and dangers of the forest, steeped in ancient myths and infused with spiritual meaning, and to shed light on its enduring significance in contemporary Russian society.

In 2014, the story of Karina Chikitova, a young girl who survived being lost in the taiga for twelve days, captured the attention of the Russian public and international media [11]. Her story became so widespread, a statue was built at Yakutsk Airport, and a movie entitled *Karina* (2024). The Forest turned her experience into a powerful symbol, serves as a metaphor for the human spirit’s capacity to endure and transform. The film shows forests as both dangerous and magical places, helping audiences think about how humans and nature connect. Those winding forest paths in the movie aren’t just about finding your way, they represent deeper hopes and Russia’s long cultural connection with forests.

Russia with its vast forest cover, ranks first in the world by forest area, Russia is the home to more than one-fifth of the world’s forest areas [10], with approximately half of its land covered by forests. This abundance of forest resources has given rise a rich history of forest culture heritage, providing both a diverse environment for exploration and a source of danger for those who are willing to venture too far and deep. Many people disappear in the forests of Russia every year. According to the Russian search and rescue organization Extremum, in 2023, from August to October, 20–30 reports of missing people in the forest were received per day, with the peak in the Leningrad Region at 50–60 reports [12]. This making the experience of being lost deeply significant phenomenon. Despite its prevalence, academic research on this topic remains scarce, highlighting the need for a deeper exploration of its cultural and symbolic implications.

The anguish of becoming lost in forests can be interpreted as a yearning to return to primordality precisely because it exposes modernity’s fundamental paradox, the incommensurability between the civilized body and untamed wilderness. Bibikhin’s exploration of the ontology of human nature culminates in a radical assertion: “Независимо от того, действительно ли человек это the naked ape Морриса, был ли он косматый и когда перестал, если перестал быть, феноменологически важно для нас то, что опыт косматости нам одновременно и недоступен и близок, мысленный эксперимент с нашей косматостью нам доступен” [2, p. 23]. He argues that even if *Homo sapiens* never possessed literal косматость (hirsute corporeality), This paradoxical state of perpetual arms-length proximity is hardwired into human instinct, forming the foundational cipher through which we negotiate the on-

tological tension with nature. Karina's statue transcends mere commemoration of an individual; it stands as a liminal monument straddling the borderlands of civilization and wildness, marking humanity's eternal nostalgia: a lament for the "hirsute corporeality" we never truly possessed yet perpetually mourn, a primal embodiment stripped away by the civilizing process, whose phantom ache persists in our ecological unconscious.

The phenomenon of getting lost in the forest has a very profound symbolic meaning. It is deeply rooted in culture, psychology and spirit. The forest is vast in area and the situation is still unpredictable. It is a space in an intermediate state. Here, individuals will transition from familiar places to strange and unknown ones. In Slavic folklore and Russian literature and culture, Most of the time, the forest is depicted as a field associated with mystery, danger and change. In this place, individuals will confront their inner fears, desires and uncertainties. It is said that the process of getting lost is not merely a physical loss of direction, but a metaphorical pursuit of self-discovery and exploration of existence. The works of writers like Tolstoy and Dostoevsky depict the forest as a space where morality and psychology conflict. This reflects the broader social struggles during that period of historical and cultural turmoil. In this way, the phenomenon of getting lost has become a powerful metaphor for human beings' pursuit of meaning, identity and belonging. Against the backdrop of the current era, the experience of getting lost in the forest echoes modern people's anxiety about getting lost and finding their way. When people are confronted with deteriorating environments, technological alienation and the uncertainty of existence, The forest serves as a symbolic space, allowing people to reflect on the relationship between humans and nature as well as themselves. Movies and literary works, such as the story of Karina Chikitova, this girl got lost in the coniferous forest for 12 days but miraculously survived in the end, highlighting the dual nature of the forest. It is dangerous but also has the significance of changing people. This story has triggered people to think about the long-standing cultural significance of the forest. In the forest, The act of getting lost has become a common metaphor, symbolizing tenacity, hope and the endurance of the human spirit. From this perspective, the forest has always been an eternal prototype. It enables us to understand the complexity of human living conditions and the eternal pursuit of meaning by humans in a constantly changing world. The depiction of getting lost in the forest in literary works is deeply rooted in the cultural structure, reflecting the uniqueness of the natural environment. It also reflects the complex situation of human psychology and spirit. The forest is not merely a tangible space; it is a realm brimming with symbolic significance. Through the analysis of literature, folk tales, and historical events, it can be revealed that getting lost in the forest has multiple meanings, depicting it as a profound metaphor that points to humanity's understanding of the self, society, and the universe.

The forests outlive humans by centuries, their apparent durability being the temporal counterpart to their physical vastness. They are both larger and older than human. Forest scenes are dense in sensory information, the trunks and undergrowth obscure human sight lines, sounds become muffled or indirect, and scents emerge from myriad botanical and animal

sources. When traversing the forest, light, color, and temperature undergo constant modulation. The clear perspective typically gained from distance weakens upon entering the forest, replaced by a sense of immersion that demands direct engagement with the immediate surroundings. Disorientation occurs more easily in forests than in open landscapes due to restricted visibility and filtered light. This may explain Ivan Turgenev's frequent use of forest settings in his works, forests evoke human transience and disorientation more powerfully than other environments.

The forests are generally regarded by people as a space full of unknowns and dangers. However, they are also places where people can achieve self-discovery and transformation. The vastness and unpredictability of forests make them a symbol of losing one's way. In Russian literary works, forests are mostly depicted as a space. In this space, people will go through a transitional process from the known to the unknown. Such a transformation is not merely a physical state of confusion, but also involves exploration on the psychological and spiritual levels. In Slavic folklore, the forest is the abode of mysterious creatures and supernatural forces. Entering the forest often means stepping into a world full of challenges and tests everywhere. Such an image actually reflects the fear of the unknown in human hearts and a yearning for self-awareness. It is said that getting lost in the forest is regarded as a ritualistic experience, through which individuals can achieve their own growth and transformation.

The experience of getting lost in the forest is also interpreted by people as a rather profound metaphor for the core issues of human survival. It is not merely a physical state, but also a psychological and spiritual one. In Russian literature, the situation of being lost is mostly used to symbolize the confusion and struggle that an individual experiences when there are upheavals in society, history and culture. In the works written by Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, the forest is depicted as a space full of contradictions and conflicts everywhere, where people struggle with their inner turmoil and moral predicaments. Such a description actually reflects the complexity and contradictions existing in the process of Russian society's development towards modernization and Westernization. The experience of getting lost in the forest turns into a profound reflection on oneself and society, and individuals rely on such reflection to seek meaning and direction.

In contemporary era, the significance of getting lost in the forest echoes the anxiety of modern people about losing their way and seeking a sense of belonging. The present era is characterized by environmental crises, technological alienation, and existential uncertainties. The experience of getting lost in the forest is not just a painful torment that individuals may encounter. It has also become a collective symbol of modern society's efforts to seek direction and establish connections. After analyzing contemporary Russian literature and films in this article, it is found that there is a connection between getting lost in the forest and modern social problems such as environmental deterioration and technological disconnection. The forest belongs to the natural space, which provides an environment that enables people to reflect on the relationship between humans and nature. This will prompt individuals to draw on this experience of getting lost in the forest, to re-think their position in the universe and the role they play.

The Aesthetics of Getting Lost in Forest

The Russian forest, with its vastness and unpredictability, serves as an ideal setting for exploring the themes central to Lostology. In literature, from the mystical woodlands of Slavic folklore to the haunting landscapes in the works of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, the forest emerges as a liminal space where individuals confront their deepest fears, desires, and uncertainties. These narratives often depict the experience of being lost not as a mere accident but as a transformative journey, one that mirrors the universal human quest for meaning and belonging.

In Russian literature, there exists a unique “aesthetics of being lost”, a poetic and philosophical tradition that transforms the act of being lost into a profound narrative and way of being. This phenomenon is far more than just physical disorientation, it is deeply rooted in the cultural psyche, a metaphor for psychological exploration, historical upheaval, and confrontation with the unknown. This literary ‘aesthetics of lost’ finds its anthropological counterpart in Arnold van Gennep’s tripartite model, separation transition, and incorporation [5, p. vii], it demonstrates, transitional states require ritualized passage through structural ambiguity. Just as Russian narratives transform physical disorientation into existential revelation, the liminal state similarly elevates transitional chaos into a space of potential transformation. Where the forest in Russian literature becomes a crucible for self-discovery, the ritual liminal phase creates its own symbolic wilderness. This framework reveals how cultures ritualize disorientation, whether through artistic representation, as a necessary passage toward new understanding. In this transitional state, normal social roles disappear, leaving everyone equal and without their usual identities. But this equal state doesn’t last—while real-life rituals eventually restore normal order, Russian stories often show characters staying in this changed state permanently, as seen in Russian literature where wanderers stumble upon profound truths in forest. This transformative quality reflects Russia’s own historical relationship with its vast wilderness, the national identity itself was forged through cycles of loss and rediscovery. “Being lost” state shows an important Russian contradiction, people both want clear answers but also resist them. Russian writing makes this uncertain state last, valuing the search for meaning more than finding final answers. Being lost changes from a short-term problem to a lasting way of seeing the world, reflecting Russia’s own back-and-forth history between being open and closed, old and new. through this approach, getting lost into a powerful way to explore how people understand who they are, what they remember, and where they belong in our changing world.

This Russian tradition of sustained liminality stands in striking contrast to the Transcendentalist resolution proposed by Ralph Waldo Emerson. When Emerson declares that in the woods “all mean egotism vanishes” as one becomes “a transparent eyeball” participating in divine unity [4, chap. 1], he articulates an essentially optimistic vision of disorientation—where losing one’s way physically precipitates gaining spiritual clarity. The Russian forest, however, refuses such metaphysical consolation. Where Emerson’s wanderer emerges from the wilderness reborn into cosmic har-

mony, the Russian aesthetics of being lost deliberately resists such meta-physical closure. Where Emerson's disorientation leads to harmony, Russian lostness cultivates a productive unease, transforming the forest into a space where questions remain perpetually open.

In the 18th century, the Enlightenment emphasised reason, order, and the triumph of human intellect over nature's chaos. The forest as a wild and untamed space. Most of the time, it is depicted as a dangerous and less rational domain, which is different from the ideal advocated by the Enlightenment. However, even within such a cognitive framework, the forest actually represents a space that can test the limits of human rationality. In many literary works, those characters who venture into the forest often find themselves encountering many unknown situations. This forces them to think whether relying solely on reason is enough. The tense relationship between this reason and all the irrationality of nature lays the foundation for later literary exploration. Because a forest is a space with certain limits. By the 19th century, during the Romantic period, the role played by the forest became more subtle. It turned into a terrifying place that was somewhat beyond ordinary cognition. In this place, individuals could confront what they feared and longed for most deep in their hearts. The forest was no longer merely a simple symbol of irrationality. It has become a space where spiritual and psychological exploration can be carried out. Against such a backdrop, getting lost in the forest has become a metaphor for the human living conditions. It reflects the struggles of individuals in complex life, their own identities, and social changes. In the literary works of the 18th and 19th centuries, the theme of getting lost in the forest occupied a very crucial position. It reflects the tension between reason and myth, as well as the broader existentialist and psychological struggles at that time. Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno criticized the "domination of nature" of the Enlightenment. Their view was: "The conquest of all nature by the sovereign subject will eventually lead to the domination of blind objectivity and nature. This tendency eliminates all the oppositions in bourgeois thought, the opposition between moral rigor and absolute immorality" [6, p. 230]. During the period of the Enlightenment, forests mostly symbolized the conflict between human reason and the untamed natural forces. They became a space where one could explore the complex conditions of human psychology and the limits of reason. This tense relationship was most vividly depicted in Ivan Turgenev's *The Meadow*. It is a very typical example of how the forest embodies these themes, which integrates elements such as myth, rationality and the experience of human disorientation. The grassland of the North Town is a proof of this transformation. This story is about a group of boys from peasant families gathering on the grassland beside the forest to share those supernatural stories together. The forest that can be faintly seen in the background is the actual boundary between the known world and the unknown world, and also a symbolic boundary. The stories told by the boys were all about myths and legends of the forest, which presented the deep-seated fear in their hearts and their fascination with the mystery of the forest. As a relatively rational observer, the adult narrator still held a skeptical attitude towards these stories. The forest itself became a space where reason and myth could coexist. This highlights the limitations of human comprehension abil-

ity. The experience of getting lost in the forest is the core content of the theme of this story. One of the boys told that once he heard a voice coming from the forest calling him. At that moment, the boundary between reality and imagination became blurred. This plot emphasizes the role of the forest as a limited space. In this place, the boundaries between rationality and irrationality, nature and the supernatural have been constantly challenged. For the boys, the forest is not just a tangible place; it is also a field with uncertainties where they have to struggle against fear and the unknown. Turgenev's description of the steppe forest also reflects the broader cultural and historical background of 19th-century Russia. As this country has undergone significant social and political changes, forests have become a symbol of tradition and change. For those peasant characters, the forest is a space where ancient myths and folktales have always existed. It gives people a sense of continuity in a rapidly changing world. Meanwhile, the unpredictability of the forest also reflects the uncertainty of their lives, highlighting the tension between tradition and modernity.

By reading these literary works, we can discover that the forest is not merely a physical landscape; it is also an eternal symbol for human beings to seek meaning in that constantly changing world. As a literary theme that has always existed, the forest forms a relatively unique interpretive range through the image of "loss" in different narrative traditions. Folk literature has elevated forest wandering to a metaphorical dialogue between humans and nature, and embedded collective memories of survival wisdom into membership ceremonies. Modern literature, on the other hand, has transformed the forest into a tangible projection of a psychological maze, reflecting the listlessness of the spirit of *The Times* through the experience of personal disorientation. Among these two approaches of interpretation, the former one is rooted in the transmission of cultural DNA, while the latter one stems from modernist reflection. Finally, at a higher dimension, these two approaches complement each other, and together they reveal the persistent confusion and pursuit of humanity when facing the unknown.

In the folk narrative tradition of Russia, the forest is not a passively existing natural landscape. In fact, it is a limited space full of spiritual initiative. In this space, natural laws and supernatural forces are interwoven with each other, just like Baba Yaga's magic hut, which is located on "chicken" legs. And it will constantly change its own position. And the Wolf, it will tell those ancient prophecies in human language. Under such circumstances, the boundaries between life and death, reality and fantasy all become blurred. If someone gets lost in the forest, this is definitely not an accidental misfortune, but a carefully planned enlightenment ceremony. This ceremony is a strict test of the protagonist's wisdom, courage and moral purity.

The well-known Russian folk tale *Martha and the Bear* seems simple on the surface, but in fact, it contains profound ecological philosophical principles. When the young Martha, carrying a willow basket, bravely goes into the forest to pick mushrooms, she unknowingly steps across the invisible boundary between civilization and the wilderness. The forest responded to her overreaching behavior. A huge brown bear caught her and then led her

to a quiet small room in the centre of the forest. This dramatic scene particularly appropriately summed up all the dual meanings of «getting lost» in Russian folk narratives. On the surface, it referred to getting lost in the actual space. But in fact, it means that the cognitive framework has undergone significant changes. Martha did not cry or resist. She demonstrated the somewhat cunning humor characteristic of Russian folk wisdom. Behind this seemingly childish little trick, there was actually a profound cultural understanding of the relationship between human beings and nature. When Martha hid in the box full of pies and successfully escaped, she not only gained physical freedom for herself, but also brought back to the civilized world a survival wisdom honed in the wild environment. This story did not end with that simple opposition. The bear was not punished. Instead, it established an unexpected friendship with Martha. This reconciliation implies the true meaning of “getting lost” in Russian folk thought, which is not to conquer nature, but to rely on experiencing a period of chaos. Finally, a higher-level state of harmony is achieved.

Industrial Age Lostness

From the perspective of linguistic anthropology, the shared Proto-Slavic root *blōd-* underlying both Russian ‘заблудиться’ (to get lost) and ‘блуд’ (moral transgression) reflects a traditional cognitive duality of deviation—where spatial disorientation and ethical failure were conceptually linked. This etymological connection confirms the dual nature of forest disorientation analyzed earlier, representing both a disruption of spatial cognition and a reconstruction of spiritual values. This ancient conceptual framework, preserved in the linguistic record, offers crucial insights for understanding Industrial Age Lostness as a modern manifestation of this primordial pattern of disorientation.

At the turn of the 19th and the 20th centuries, when Russia was undergoing rapid industrialization, its society was increasingly bogged down in the throes of material pursuit and alienation. This period marked a significant shift in the fundamental relationship between humanity and nature when labor, the traditional mediating link between the two, was distorted by industrial capitalism. The relentless pursuit of industrial progress not only eroded spiritual values but fundamentally altered the very nature of labor itself, casting a shadow over the cultural and moral fabric of Russian civilization. In this forest of modernity, the paths were neither clear nor guided by reason. Instead, they were shrouded in gloom and darkness, where the very notion of direction seemed futile. The individuals wandering through this metaphorical wilderness were lost, not just in a physical sense, but in a profound spiritual and existential way. The forest, vast and indifferent, offered no signs or markers; its trails were governed by chance rather than logic, and rationality proved to be an inadequate compass in such an environment.

The landscape of this era can be likened to a dense, foreboding forest, a metaphor for both the societal disorientation and the ruptured human-nature connection. Just as the historical evolution of labor demonstrates humanity’s journey from awe and submission to nature, through conquest and control, Russia’s industrialization represented an extreme manifestation of the domination phase. The forest metaphor captures this existential

lostness: where once labor had organically connected people to their environment, industrial alienation now severed those ties, leaving workers adrift in a manufactured wilderness of their own creation. This transitional moment in Russian history thus embodies the larger dialectic of human-nature relations suspended between the lost harmony of the past and the unrealized promise of future reconciliation. As K. Marx observed, the “remarkable phenomenon in the history of modern industry” is “that machinery sweeps away every moral and natural restriction on the length of the working-day” [8, p. 532]. This complete dissolution of boundaries finds its perfect embodiment in Russia’s industrial forests where ceaseless mechanical rhythms replaced organic cycles, reducing workers’ bodies to mere fuel for production. G. Lukács incisively reveals in *History and Class Consciousness* (1923): “The worker, too, must present himself as the ‘owner’ of his labor-power, as if it were a commodity. His specific situation is defined by the fact that his labor-power is his only possession. His fate is typical of society as a whole in that this self-objectification, this transformation of a human function into a commodity reveals in all its starkness the dehumanized and dehumanizing function of the commodity relation” [7, p. 92]. Under the domination of this reified consciousness, workers not only submit to the discipline of mechanized production but internalize this alienated condition as “the true representatives of his societal existence,” where “the abstract, quantitative mode of calculability shows itself here in its purest form” [7, p. 93]. This alienated disorientation reaches its zenith within the modern forest of industrialization: those very machines that promised liberation from nature’s constraints ultimately become the hidden chains of an even more concealed wilderness. The reified mind treats the world as a collection of isolated facts, like a man lost in a forest who sees only individual trees but not the forest as a whole. The consciousness of reification traps people in the “immediacy” of existence, rendering them passive recipients of a given reality, incapable of grasping the dynamic totality of social relations. In this forest of modernity, the paths were neither clear nor guided by reason. Instead, they were shrouded in gloom and darkness, where the very notion of direction seemed futile. The individuals wandering through this metaphorical wilderness were lost, not just in a physical sense, but in a profound spiritual and existential way. The forest, vast and indifferent, offered no signs or markers; its trails were governed by chance rather than logic, and rationality proved to be a failure in such an environment.

Being lost in this forest was not merely a matter of losing one’s way, it was entering a place where reality and fantasy became hard to tell apart. The trees seemed to press in on the wanderer, the branches forming a roof that blocked the sunlight, leaving only faint light below. The ground covered with leaves and bushes, creating an unnatural quiet that made the loneliness feel worse. Every sound, a faraway rustling, the crack of a branch seemed to warn of hidden dangers, making you imagine dangerous animals or evil spirits waiting in the shadows.

This sense of being lost was not confined to a single dimension—it permeated every aspect of life. Whether a person is striving to seek goals, exploring the meaning of life, or merely seeking a path to keep moving for-

ward, the forest of industrial modernity offers no comfort to him. In this place, the soul's longing for establishing connections and pursuing transcendence runs into the walls of indifference, ruthless estrangement and dehumanization. The spiritual degradation of that era was clearly reflected in those who lost their way. They wandered aimlessly in the shadowy woods of that era and had no connection with each other. Against such a background, the forest became a very powerful symbol of the survival crisis of this era. Here, The old ways of understanding the world in the past and the positions people held in it have all been uprooted, leaving only a situation as uncertain as a maze in the end. The path taken by the missing person is not only a physical trajectory, but also a fragmented and opportune-driven life trajectory that drifts around in a rapidly changing world. Reason, which once seemed like a guiding light, is now beginning to crumble in the face of such great complexity and despair. This forest, With an impenetrable darkness and unpredictable turns, it proves that a civilization has fallen into a very profound state of confusion between the new and the old, the spirit and the material, the known and the unknown.

The act of getting lost in the forest is not just a physical experience; it is also a kind of torture on the psychological and spiritual levels. It forces people to confront the feelings of fear and unease deep in their hearts, peel off the protective shell that civilization gives to people, and expose the most primitive self hidden beneath. In the forest, Human beings are no longer defined by various roles in society or the material wealth they possess. On the contrary, human beings are left with only the most fundamental things of existence, namely survival, instinct and the pursuit of the meaning of life. This situation of stripping away one's external identity usually gives people a particularly strong sense of vulnerability. However, it also opens a door for self-discovery and transformation. For some people, the forest is like a place that can offer enlightenment. There, the chaos and unpredictability of nature precisely reflect the inner fluctuations deep in the human soul. In this limited space, the boundaries between the self and others, and between rationality and errancy, gradually begin to blur. Those ancient trees in the forest and the hidden depths seem to hold secrets about existence. They whisper some truths that can only be understood when one is completely lost. It is precisely at these moments of getting lost that Most of the time, people will find that their true selves are not the ones they are now, but the ones they might become in the future. However, for some others, the forest is a place of despair, like a maze that one can never get out of. The countless trees that look almost the same, the oppressive silence, and the lack of clear markings all come together to create a sense of despair, which actually reflects the survival crisis people faced at that time. In this forest, time seems to have lost its meaning, constantly extending towards a future with no solutions and no hope of redemption. Those who wander around in the forest are trapped in this present that seems to never end, and can only be forced to face their fruitless feeling of seeking meaning in this world that seems to care nothing about their struggles.

This forest actually also metaphorically represents the broader social changes that occurred in Russia during this period. With the continuous de-

velopment of industrialization, it reshaped the local landscape. The traditional way of life, which was originally rooted in the natural rhythm and seasonal cycle, is being replaced day by day by the demands of modernization development. Forests used to be the source that sustains people's livelihoods and rejuvenates their spirits, but nowadays they have become a symbol of alienation and disconnection that come along with this transformation. The roads that used to lead to familiar places now seem to have no clue where they lead. This makes people feel as if they are drifting in a world that has lost its meaning. In literary works and artistic creations, the forest has become a frequent theme, reflecting the anxiety and inner desires existing in a transforming society. Writers like Anton Chekhov and Maxim Gorky used the forest as the backdrop of their stories to explore the tension between tradition and modernity, while painters like Ivan Shishkin captured the unforgettable beauty and mystery of the forest. In these works, the forest is not merely a simple backdrop. It is itself like a character, a living and breathing entity, and it will have an impact on the lives of those who enter the forest. The experience of getting lost in the forest actually reflects a broader human living situation. It reminds us that our understanding of things is actually very fragile and the things we can control are also very limited. In the forest, just like in life, the path we choose to take is mostly uncertain. The destination we desire to reach in our hearts may never be reached. However, it is precisely in the process of wandering around and facing the unknown that we discover the possibility of transforming and renewing ourselves. Although the forest is dark and dangerous, it is also a place full of potential opportunities and a space that can make people lose their way. But those who get lost inside may find a way out as time goes by.

The theme of being lost in the forest occupies a significant place in the literature of the 18th and 19th centuries, reflecting the tension between rationality and myth, as well as the broader existential and psychological struggles of the time. During the Enlightenment period, the forest often symbolized the clash between human reason and the untamed forces of nature, while in the Romantic and post-Romantic eras, it became a space for exploring the complexities of the human psyche and the limits of rationality. Ivan Turgenev's *Bezhin Meadow*, a story from his collection *A Hunter's Sketches*, serves as a poignant example of how the forest embodies these themes, blending elements of myth, rationality, and the human experience of disorientation.

Getting Lost in Forest as Method

When half way through the journey of our life
I found that I was in a gloomy wood,
because the path which led aright was lost.

Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*

As one of the most paradigmatic and hermeneutically challenging poetic masterpieces in Western literary history, Dante's *Divine Comedy* constructs a metaphysical journey of the soul through the afterlife across its 14,000-line epic expanse. Beneath the poetic surface of its opening "dark wood" imagery

lies a profound existential proposition, every individual will ultimately encounter their own “forest of spiritual disorientation” in ontological terms.

With the dawn of the Age of Reason, the scientific method emerged as the definitive path through the metaphorical forest of human ignorance. In his seminal work *Discourse on Method*, French philosopher, René Descartes proposed mathematical reasoning as humanity’s tool for mastering nature. His famous forest analogy illustrates this paradigm: “I would be imitating travelers who, finding themselves lost in some forest, should not wander about turning this way and that, nor, worse still, stop in one place, but should always walk in as straight a line as they can in one direction and never change it for feeble reasons, even if at the outset it had perhaps been only chance that made them choose it, for by this means, even if they are not going exactly where they wish, at least they will eventually arrive somewhere where they will probably be better off than in the middle of a forest” [3, p. 14]. This a philosophical stance that would fundamentally shape Western epistemology.

Berdyaev profoundly observed that the Russian soul embodies a distinctive “wandering” quality: “Россия – страна безграничной свободы духа, страна странничества и исканий Божьей правды... Русский человек с большой легкостью духа уходит от всякой нормированной жизни. Тип странника характерен для России и так прекрасен. Странник – самый свободный человек на земле. Он ходит по земле, но стихия его воздушная, он не врос в землю, в нем нет приземистости. Странник свободен от ‘мира’ и вся тяжесть земли и земной жизни свелась для него к небольшой котомке на плечах. Величие русского народа и призванность его к высшей жизни сосредоточены в типе странника. Русский тип странника нашел в себе выражение не только в народной жизни, но и жизни культурной, в жизни лучшей части интеллигенции. И здесь мы знаем странников, свободных духом, ни к чему не прикрепленных, вечных путников, ищущих невидимого града... Русской душе не сидится на месте, это не местная душа. В России, в душе народа есть какое-то бесконечное искание, искание незримого дома. Перед русской душой открываются дали, и нет очерченного горизонта перед духовными ее очами” [1, p. 12]. The wandering spirit reflects a fundamental rejection of fixed forms and rigid structures, mirroring the organic, untamed nature of Russia’s forest landscapes. In this philosophical tradition, wisdom reveals itself unexpectedly, much like the sudden clearing one might discover when wandering through an endless taiga – moments of clarity emerging from apparent disorder. This represents not merely an epistemological approach, but a complete ontological orientation towards existence, where being itself is understood as fundamentally migratory and unbounded. This spiritual temperament not only rejects geographical settlement, but fundamentally challenges the paradigm of cognition, embracing a state of unbelonging as a tool but a mode of existence. Unlike Descartes’ methodology, the Russian approach understands truth not as something to be “discovered”, but as something that emerges and is “revealed” through the very act of wandering.

Conclusion

The experience of being lost in the forest was not only a matter of losing one's way, but rather an excursion to a realm in which the boundaries between reality and illusion became blurred. Trees created an eerie quiet that amplified the sense of isolation, and fed the imagination with visions of hiding predators or malevolent spirits. Whether the individual yearned for purpose, meaning, or simply a way forward, the forest as metaphor for industrial modernity offered no solace. It was a space where the soul's yearning for connection and transcendence was met by the cold, unyielding walls of alienation and dehumanization. The spiritual degradation of the age was mirrored in the disorientation of those who wandered aimless and unfocused, through the shadowed forests of their time. In this context, the forest became an important powerful symbol of the era's existential crisis, a place where the old ways of understanding the world and one's place within it had been uprooted, leaving only a labyrinth of uncertainty. The paths of the lost were not just physical routes, but also the fragmented, contingent pathways of lives adrift in a rapidly changing world. Rational thought was a guiding light, but now it faltered in the face of such overwhelming complexity and despair. The forest, with its darkness and unpredictable turns, stood as a testament to the profound disorientation of a civilization caught between the old and the new, the spiritual and the material, the known and the unknown. The phenomenon of being lost in Russian forests deconstructs modernity's fantasy of controlling. This geographical cognition has been collapsed in front of the grander ecological dimension. In his *Dark Ecology* Timothy Morton incisively observes: "...ecological awareness is disorienting precisely because of these multiple scales. We sense that there are monsters even if we can't see them directly" [9, p. 41]. When industrial civilization collides with environmental rhythms, this dissonance manifests itself as hyperobjects.

Getting lost in the forest is also a psychological and spiritual ordeal. It forced individuals to confront their deepest fears and insecurities, stripping away the veneer of civilization to reveal the primal self beneath. In the forest, one was no longer defined by social roles or material possessions, instead, one was reduced to the most basic elements of existence, instinct, and the search for meaning. This stripping away of external identities often led to a profound sense of vulnerability, but it also opened the door to self-discovery and transformation. Meanwhile, the forest became a place of revelation, where the chaos and unpredictability of nature mirrored the inner turmoil of the human soul. In this liminal space, the boundaries between the self and the other, the rational and the irrational, began to dissolve. The forest, with its ancient trees and hidden depths, seemed to hold the secrets of existence, whispering truths that could only be understood in moments of profound disorientation. It was in these moments of being lost that individuals often found themselves not as they were, but as they could be. The forest was a place of despair, a labyrinth from which there seemed no escape. The endless repetition of trees, the oppressive silence, and the absence of clear markers created a sense of hopelessness that mirrored the existential crises of the age. In this forest, time itself seemed to lose meaning,

stretching endlessly into a future that offered no promise of resolution or redemption. The wanderer, trapped in this eternal present, was forced to confront the futility of their search for meaning in a world that seemed indifferent to their struggles.

The forest also served as a metaphor for the broader societal changes taking place in Russia during this period. As industrialization reshaped the landscape, the traditional ways of life—rooted in the rhythms of nature and the cycles of the seasons—were increasingly displaced by the demands of modernity. The forest, once a source of sustenance and spiritual renewal, became a symbol of the alienation and disconnection that accompanied this transformation. The paths that had once led to familiar places now seemed to lead nowhere, leaving individuals adrift in a world that no longer made sense.

Ultimately, the experience of being lost in the forest was a reflection of the broader human condition, a reminder of the fragility of our understanding and the limits of our control. In the forest, as in life, the paths we take are often uncertain, and the destinations we seek may remain forever out of reach. It is in the act of wandering, of confronting the unknown, that we find the possibility of transformation and renewal. The forest, with its darkness and its dangers, is also a place of potential.

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