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DOI: 10.35539/LTNC.2025.0060.08

Transforming Literary Landscapes of an Emerging Nation: Wetlands in the Young Estonia Albums

Dzimstošas nācijas mainīgās literārās ainavas: mitrāju attēlojums “Jaunās Igaunijas” albumos

Keywords:

mire,
ecocriticism,
nature writing,
modernization,
liminality,
symbolism

Atslēgvārdi:

purvs,
ekokritika,
dabas rakstība,
modernizācija,
liminalitāte,
simbolisms

Summary

The Young Estonia (*Noor-Eesti*) movement can without reservations be called the most significant cultural phenomenon of early 20th-century Estonia, comprising a number of eminent authors, among whom the most outstanding were the poet Gustav Suits and the fiction author and essayist Friedebert Tuglas. The five anthological albums (1905–1915) of *Noor-Eesti* witnessed the development of Estonian literature from earlier realist tendencies towards symbolism and modernistic emphases. Their artistic transformations were accompanied by new evaluations of Estonian landscapes in literary representation. From the perspective of ecocriticism, this article seeks to explore the bog and fen landscapes of the Young Estonia texts, noting their significance for what is currently considered a national landscape, particularly in the popular image of Estonia as “a country of pristine nature”. The pragmatic views of mires held by 19th-century country-dwelling peasants in literary realism were gradually replaced by other modes of depiction. Mythologizing views of bogs and fens as mystical or supernatural sites have contributed to contemporary fascination with folk horror; the mire has also been used symbolically in ideologically loaded discourse to denote social ills, yet approached with curiosity and aesthetic sensitivity by authors attentive to the actual landscape (its plants, birds, animals), thus producing nature writing. In the *Noor-Eesti* albums, literary treatment of the mire shifts from the realist-anthropocentric toward the fantastic-ecocentric.

Kopsavilkums

Kustību “Jaunā Igaunija” (*Noor-Eesti*) var nešauboties nosaukt par visnozīmīgāko parādību 20. gs. sākuma Igaunijas kultūrvidē. Šī kustība ietvēra vairākus ievērojamus autorus, kuru vidū izcilākie bija dzejnieks Gustavs Suits un prozaīķis un esejists Frīdeberts Tuglass. “Jaunās Igaunijas” pieci antoloģiskie albumi (1905–1915) liecina par Igaunijas literatūras attīstību no agrīnajām reālisma tendencēm līdz simbolisma un modernisma izpausmēm. Stila un māksliniecisko paņēmieni transformācijas šajos albumos pavadīja arī pārmaiņas Igaunijas ainavu uztverē un literārajā attēlojumā. Šī raksta mērķis ir no ekokritiskas perspektīvas aplūkot “Jaunās Igaunijas” tekstos aprakstītos purvus, uzsverot to nozīmi šodien tā sauktajā nacionālajā ainavā, it īpaši populārajā priekšstatā par Igauniju kā “neskartas dabas zemi”. 19. gs. literatūrā lasāmos zemnieku pragmatiskos viedokļus par purvainu zemi vēlāk papildināja un pamazām nomainīja citi skatpunkti. No mitoloģiskajiem priekšstatiem par purvu kā mistikā un pārdabiskā mājvietu ir izaugusi laikmetīgā aizraušanās ar etnošaismu žanru; ideoloģiska satura literatūrā purva tēls ir ticis lietots kā sociālu problēmu simbols, savukārt tie autori, kas iedziļinājušies reālajā purva ainavā (ieskaitot tam raksturīgos augus, putnus un dzīvniekus), tai veltījuši zinātkāres un estētisma pilnu dabas rakstību. Purva attēlojumos “Jaunās Igaunijas” albumos uzsvars pārvirzās no reālistiski antropocentriskā uz fantastiski ekocentrisko.

Introduction

Literary scholarship today is emerging from a social and intellectual context more urgently aware of environmental topics than any preceding period. The late 20th century veered away from an earlier focus on pure textuality in the humanities, meeting new challenges prompted by the so-called spatial and material turns. The period also witnessed the emergence and institutionalization of the branch of literary study most often referred to as *ecocriticism*. A widely accepted working definition of the field has been provided by Cheryll Glotfelty who saw ecocriticism broadly as “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (Glotfelty 1996: xviii), and early ecocriticism was indeed predominantly concerned with the study of works in which representation of natural environments was noticeably foregrounded. More recently, engaging with acute environmental issues such as the global climate crisis has surpassed the emphasis on aesthetic or affective appreciation of nature in ecocritical studies. Still, the presence and function of particular environments in literary works, either as landscapes open to sensory perception or ecosystems accommodating multiple species, remain an important node of enquiry. Landscapes are considered as being continuously re-created and negotiated in an interplay of nature and culture. The materiality and agency of more-than-human (Abram 1997) nature is duly recognized, yet there is also an awareness that the idea, myth or vision of landscape, once established, will become as if its constituent part and provide a lens through which the landscape is generally perceived (Schama 1995: 61).

Not so long ago a couple of Estonian literary scholars were tasked with compiling a comprehensive survey of the state of the art of ecocriticism in the Baltic countries for the special issue on European ecocritical traditions of the online journal *Ecozon@*. The attempt to chart the still somewhat fledgling developments of the field in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania aimed to trace the individual research interests of scholars active in these three countries, as well as to detect the overlapping foci and common topics in the publications by Baltic authors of studies with an ecocritical slant (see Tüür, Soovik 2019). What tentatively stood out among the variety of publications and activities considered was an emphasis on landscapes, in particular the forest – a rather unsurprising observation whose obviousness is best encapsulated in the oft-quoted remark by the landscape scholar Denis Cosgrove that “the forest has been crucial in framing national identities in most countries north of the Alps” (Cosgrove 2003: 16). However, the woods were seconded by the salience of another type of ecosystem whose presence may not seem similarly

predictable – wetlands. These first and foremost emerged in the range of academic interests in the case of Estonian and Lithuanian ecocritics – a comprehensive contribution from the latter (Ragaišienė et al. 2007) even bears a suggestive title that in translation reads as *Ecocritical Bog Pools*.

Lithuanian ecocriticism has, for instance, touched upon the internationally explored topic of wetlands' parallels with femininity (Ragaišienė 2007);¹ and since the conducting of the survey, more critical attention has been paid to the role of swamps in selected Lithuanian fiction of the 20th and 21st centuries (Mažeikis 2019). As regards spatial arts, Gediminas and Nomeda Urbonas curated the Lithuanian pavilion at the Venice Biennale of Architecture in 2018, using the concept of the swamp as a curatorial strategy – a move inspired by the swamp's potential for futurity as suggested by Henry David Thoreau (Bailey-Charteris 2024: 91). As concerns Latvia's landscapes, it seems that both literary and art historical studies – which appear to draw more on the resources of ecocriticism's sister discipline of geocriticism (e.g. Daija, Kalnačs 2019; Kalnačs 2023) –, as well as geographers (cf. e.g. Skultans 2001; Bunkše 2012), have paid closer attention to pastoral rural scenery as central to the national identity than to the country's bogscapes. Still, the *Ainavu dārgumi* (Landscape Treasures) selected by public vote to celebrate the Republic of Latvia's centenary also include large natural bogs (Printsmann et al. 2019: 202).

In Estonia, the country richest in wetlands among the three, mire is currently being promoted to the status of something of an iconic national landscape, particularly as it can easily be used as a metonymic token of unspoiled and pristine nature with significant ecological value (see Pungas-Kohv et al. 2015). Indeed, in this capacity wetlands may be seen to serve as the closest this part of the world has to offer to approximate the elusive construct of "wilderness". Both the low-lying fens as well as the more visually striking bogs are currently approaching the role of a flagship landscape in Estonia's national self-image, and function as a trope for the country's inhabitants alleged "inherent closeness" to nature (the sentiment of being a "nature nation" is also embraced in the neighbouring countries, of course – cf. e.g. Printsmann et al. 2019). This is also evident in symbolic practices: for instance, a writers' outing to a fen was made a focal point at an international literary festival dedicated to wilderness (see Ling 2016), and Estonia even hosted a meeting of the Baltic prime ministers in its Riisa bog, complete with ceremonial fine dining on the boardwalk (Collier 2023). A new national park in the wetlands region of Alutaguse was founded among the nation's centenary celebrations (Printsmann 2019: 196).

1 For other work from the region around the Baltic Sea adopting this perspective cf. e.g. Parente-Čapková 2020, Bailey-Charteris 2024.

The question of the status of wetlands is topical not only in the Baltics. Studies of the position of wetlands in art and literature appear in numerous other cultures of countries where such types of landscape are prominent. A comparison could certainly be made with the even more wetland-rich Finland, where mires have historically been covering more than a third of the land surface – the respective proportion has been up to a third of the land in case of Estonia (Ilomets et al. 2007: 3), although the estimation for live mires today covers no more than 9 per cent of the latter country's territory. Despite the omnipresence and consequent familiarity of this landscape in Finland, a noticeable lack of interest in fenlands has been noted as concerns the history of Finnish arts. "The so-called Golden Age of Finnish art around the turn of the 20th century which served the nationalist ethos, regarded fens as too closed and miserable to be considered as a subject of art" and "[i]n the Finnish National Romantic imagery, fens were almost ignored and may have appeared as something of lesser value", Tiina Pusa et al. (2023: 57, 61) claim. Speaking of literature, Viola Parente-Čapková (2020: 145–146) confirms the marginality and anomaly of bogs and marshes in Finnish traditional literary ethnoscapings around the turn of the 20th century.

There are literary and cultural studies that touch on more generally Nordic wetlands with an emphasis on Danish bog bodies (see Sanders 2015), Irish bogs (Fairhall 2014, Gladwin 2019), swamps in the American South (Wilson 2016), and international comparative discussions of wetlands / peatlands (Giblett 2021, 2024; Proulx 2022). These generally point at wetlands as having historically been considered spaces of dubious value, zones of decay and despair, and realms of the liminal and the supernatural, at least as concerns the cultural mainstream. Interdisciplinary research combining geography and literary history has also been following the treatment and status of mires in Estonian national imaginary and their current role both in nature conservation as well as in the internationally marketed image of the country that targets the tourist industry (Pungas-Kohv, Soovik 2019). The pattern is familiar: in the 19th century, during the time of the formation of the nation as an imagined community, the (then even more widespread) mires of Estonia similarly received but scarce artistic or literary attention, even less so in terms of praise or admiration (Pungas-Kohv 2016). Yet the situation is clearly different today.

Thus, proceeding from the vantage point of ecocritical environmental humanities², the present article attempts to enquire into how mires began to transform on the Estonian literary scene, considering that even more than other arts, it is literature that is particularly capable of contributing to the ongoing invention of what can be considered a national landscape (see Larsen 1997, 2005).

2 For a survey of the environmental humanities as a field from a specifically Latvian vantage point, see Zariņa et al. 2022.

On some contexts and concepts

Indeed, Estonian literary mires initially appeared to be either passively useless or actively unpleasant places – a persisting evaluation that required countering in society as lately as in 1970 when the ecologist Viktor Masing had to enquire: “Are bogs really so awful?”³ in the very title of his groundbreaking appeal dedicated to wetland protection (Masing 1970: 386). It is mostly in the wake of the environmental movement of the 1970s that wetlands have gained their present currency in Estonia (Pungas-Kohv et al. 2015; Pungas-Kohv, Soovik 2019; see also Annus 2025). Yet, in order to find an initial turning point in Estonian literary mire representations, we need to look further into the past. A shift in the Estonian attitudes to wetlands in literature seems to have been launched, if not fully completed, in the rush for modernization during the first decades of the 20th century.

Piret Pungas-Kohv (2016: 2120) duly recalls the literary historian Tiit Hennoste’s observation that the Estonian neoromantic literature of the early 20th century invents and employs several “self-symbols”, one of which is that of the mire (Hennoste 2016: 155). Hennoste provides no definition of his term, yet it can be contextually interpreted along the lines of “a newly emerged symbol specifically typical of, or salient in, Estonian literature of the period”. An uncontested source of programmatic literary and cultural innovation at the time, which was also responsible for a great deal of “domesticated” symbolism in Estonia, was the *Noor-Eesti* (Young Estonia) movement – a cultural upheaval that explicitly claimed: “Our slogan is: More culture! More European culture! Let us remain Estonians, but let us become Europeans too.” (NE I: 17, quoted from Mathews 1950: 118). This exhortation came from the movement’s ideologist Gustav Suits, the leading poet of his generation whose status in Estonian poetry has been compared to that of Rainis in Latvia by several scholars (see Eglāja-Kristsone 2009; Pilv 2009; Mihkelev 2019).⁴

The extensive contributions that *Noor-Eesti* made to Estonian culture have received due critical attention, manifested in edited collections dedicated either to the movement as a whole (Lindsalu 2006) or to particular works by its members (Hinrikus 2006; Hinrikus, Undusk 2022), in special issues of journals (Laak, Olesk 2008), as well as in monographs (Sisask 2018). All these have analyzed a wide range of aspects in the movement’s texts and activities. It is now time to approach the

3 Translations from Estonian are by the author of this article, unless indicated otherwise.

4 Benedikts Kalnačs (2006: 40–41) points out, however, that the most apt Latvian parallel to the Young Estonia movement would rather be the so-called *Dzelme* group (1904–1910), since the first modern period when Latvian literature (with Aspazija and Rainis as its most prominent figures) was consciously engaging with contemporary European culture had occurred already in the 1890s.

Young Estonians from the perspective of the environment – particularly taking into account the authors' own awareness of the innovative potential of their approach to nature and landscape. Looking back at *Noor-Eesti* in 1929, Suits listed among their achievements that they

[...] proclaimed the emergence of a more impassioned way of living, taught refinement to young country-people in their progress towards self-education and urbanization, *discovered new points of vantage for the appreciation of local landscape*,⁵ and initiated linguistic reforms to meet the demand for a more flexible and europeanized mode of expression. (Suits 1929: 6, quoted from Matthews 1950: 119; my emphasis).

With this in mind, my article turns to the the evolving treatment of the mire in the texts published throughout the *Noor-Eesti* movement's albums – five anthological publications that appeared during the period 1905–1915. In addition to presenting a well-defined textual corpus, the albums also serve as a representative sample of the aesthetic development of the period's Estonian literature – from the stronger vestiges of realism included in the earlier volumes towards more pronounced symbolist takes, onto which the wetland representations can be mapped. Also, the intense events of the period are significant as such – to point at a Latvian parallel, the period's significance in "the transformation of the aesthetic and thematic scope of Latvian literature" (Daija, Kalnačs 2019: 68) was a decisive impetus for Pauls Daija and Benedikts Kalnačs's geocritical study of Latvians' mobility and the broadening spatial reach in Latvian novels written between 1900–1914.

Eventually, however, a brief detour should be made into the realm of terminology, as the terms in wetland vocabulary may seem virtually synonymous, yet can denote considerably different landscapes in English and even more so when there is translation involved.⁶ In landscape scholarship, the umbrella term used for the type of wetland to be met in Estonia and thus serving as a material referent for most literary depictions would be *mire* – according to one definition, it denotes peatland that is still capable of forming new peat (this happens predominantly due to the growth of sphagnum moss), while the existent peat layer should be at least 30 cm thick. The two main stages in the life of such a landscape are the *fen* (*soo* or *madalsoo* in Estonian), which is a low-lying mire that obtains most of its water from groundwater or soil, and the *bog* (*raba* or *kõrgsoo* in Estonian), whose peat layer has grown so thick that it rises higher than the surrounding land, which means it is a raised landscape

5 In the original, Suits specifically mentions "the charms of landscapes and waterscapes" ("*maastikkude ja veestikkude veetlusi*").

6 A Latvian case in point regarding the term *purvs* is discussed by Linda Ozola-Ozoliņa and Silga Sviķe (2023).

receiving its water from precipitation.⁷ Admittedly, the literary authors discussed in the present article did not necessarily differentiate between the two and may have used the words interchangeably, while in English-language literary scholarship dedicated to Baltic texts the terms *swamp* and *marsh* may be used. The translations of the text samples cited in this article generally employ *fen* and *bog* for *soo* and *raba*, respectively, and may occasionally resort to the umbrella term of *mire*, particularly when the specific type of the landscape remains indeterminate in the quoted text.

It is to charting these particular literary mires that the article now turns, specifically focusing on the discovery of “new points of vantage” for viewing fens and bogs among the landscapes brought forward by Suits. In broad outlines, the mires in the *Noor-Eesti* albums can be divided into four categories: (1) the mire as a socially significant landscape; (2) the mire as a liminal space or a landscape of the mystical Other; (3) the mire as a symbolic image; (4) the mire as a natural landscape, an ecosystem.

Destitution and poverty by bogs and fens

The above-quoted Finnish studies claimed that the mainstream artistic depiction of Finnish fens was scarce or dismissive as these were considered “of lesser value” and “too closed and miserable”. The question of value, i.e. perceived usefulness in rural economy, is obvious also in pre-Young-Estonia literary treatments of wetlands – bogs and fens appear as a poor, useless landscape whose inhabitants by contiguity are also poor and deemed worthless. Marshy land does not allow for good crops, make fine pastures nor grow valuable timber; those inhabiting the edges of such poor lands are beggarly, wretched or downright outcasts from society. A characteristic mire description of this type is offered when setting the scene for the novella *Vari* (The Shadow, 1894) by Juhan Liiv:

The peasant will not want it, even less the poor peasant from Nurmeküla, and the manor does not really know what to do with it either. There is one thing, though, for which it suits well enough. This is attested by various bones of horses, cattle, cats and dogs, lying bleached on the ground. If any of such animals perishes, be it either through illness, ennui or an arrow, it is considered befitting to cast their bodies there. This is done by the peasants living in the vicinity. (Liiv 1966: 3).

It is by this mire, in the poverty-stricken conglomeration of hovels called Kukulinn that the protagonist has his home. Beside being a social marker of poverty, the fen is also a place of the abject, fit only for those not accepted by respectable society.

7 A concise and reader-friendly survey of the concepts can be found online: <https://peatlands.org/peatlands/types-of-peatlands/>.

Characterized by “mucky water” and “peat as brittle as porridge”, the fen “into which the cadavers and other unnecessary leftovers are cast” deserves the condemning judgement: “Here, nature has provided nothing, neither beauty nor fertility, but only sand and the bog” (Liiv 1966: 4).

The first *Noor-Eesti* albums are not devoid of attitudes towards mires that reflect evaluations of the landscape’s meagre usefulness and perceived lack of aesthetic qualities either; such attitudes may be expressed both on the part of the authorial voice and of the characters. In Friedebert Mihkelson’s (later he was to become known as Friedebert Tuglas) short story *Nõiutud ringis* (In the Enchanted Circle), the mire is seen as a suitable place of disposal not only for animal carcasses but presumably also corpses of paupers and vagrants:

We are both lost and fallen men, we tread like demons in the dirt and mud of this world. There is no more hope for anything good in us. Our lives are lost, everything is lost! What remains is just the damned flesh that is good for nothing, the bone and skin that is barely fit for filling material for a boggy mire across which a road is being built... (NE 1905: 150).⁸

Such dehumanizing hopelessness, reminiscent of the protagonist’s desolation in Liiv’s story, is not surprising in a tale whose plot starts unfolding “in a hovel standing at the edge of the Rebase-raba Bog” (NE 1905: 134). Evaluation of the bog as an ultimately negative, marginal and even evil place, bearing the features of a realm of annihilation, is particularly evident in the folkloric curse integrated into a published extract from August Kitzberg’s play *Laseb käele suud anda* (Allows to Kiss the Hand) that is set in the 17th century: “Let you, let you, I am cursing – let you die into the mire, let you rot...” (NE 1905: 110).⁹

A less florid and more pragmatic evaluation of marshy and low-value poverty-stricken farm plots comes from the Finnish-Estonian author Aino Kallas who describes the landscape on the island of Saaremaa:

The heart is in such a curious pain when you think of your fields here. As small thin ribbons they curl somewhere beside a fen, with poorly dug ditches, and poorly fertilized. Even the crops are different from those on the fields of the manor, the straws are spread thin, grow short, the ears of corn are empty (NE 1905: 43).

Kivisaare Toomas (Toomas of Kivisaare) by M. J. Wunk explicitly links social injustice and inequality with miry plots allotted to peasants by the manor owners: “[T]he manor compensated for the land it had taken with meadows ‘in the fen’ and ‘across

8 In-text references to *Noor-Eesti* albums are to NE.

9 The formula has been registered in the Estonian Folklore Archives [Rapla ERA II 293, 374 (42). 1941] and occurs also in the Estonian national epic *Kalevipoeg*; the ending reads: “upon a tussock”.

the bog', these being such plots that did not grow timber, and thus no profit whatsoever could be made from them" (NE 1907: 183). In Reinhold Kamsen's story *Murede maa* (The Land of Sorrows) a character is swearing: "[T]his damn place, it sent the man to an early grave. To pay the manor two hundred roubles in rent for such waste, for pity's sake! What could he have been thinking, taking on such a hole in the fen" (NE 1907: 81).

On the other hand, some texts point at a certain hypothetical potential of such boggy places, which prefigures Anton Hansen Tammsaare's (who briefly contributed to the third album) characters' famous struggle with the mire in *Tõde ja õigus* (Truth and Justice), his *magnum opus* that has been sending curious readers to visit the author's birthplace on a farm in Järva County and to explore its boggy surroundings ever since the publication of its first volume in 1926 (Pungas-Kohv, Soovik 2019: 299). The Young Estonia albums, however, contain but a dream of a mireless farm: "Wouldn't it be beautiful if this high and dry hill were not there, nor that low muddy fen by the river either! If there was flat dry land full of lush grass and low alder bushes that throw no shadows..." (NE 1907: 138), finally reaching a conclusion: "Think of this muddy fen – there is much fruitful soil there" (NE 1907: 142). However, no actual mire melioration works (unlike logging and subjugating wild nature to cultivation in general) are depicted in the albums. In this respect, *Noor-Eesti* appears to have served as but a half-way stop on the road towards Tammsaare's influential work that has been jocularly labelled a "five-volume mire draining handbook" (Printsmann et al. 2019: 197). Incidentally, in 2025 the annual exhibition of the Tammsaare Museum established at the author's birthplace – a location that served as inspiration for the novel's setting of the fictional Vargamäe –, bears the title *A Hundred Years of Draining Fens at Vargamäe*.

As concerns the traditional outlook expressed in a broader corpus of contemporary realist literature, Pungas-Kohv sums it up as follows:

It seems it was not possible in the context of the time to look at the mire through rose-tinted glasses for in no way could it be transformed into the desired field or woodland, no matter how industriously it was drained. In Estonian literature the mire emerges as the embodiment of poverty and hardship. An environment that is wet and squishy, muddy and with non-existent roads helps to emphasize the weight of people's worries. (Pungas-Kohv 2016: 2118)

Nevertheless, one practical way to utilize a bog still emerges in the *Noor-Eesti* texts and that involves taking refuge in the inaccessible landscape. The fen may function as a sanctuary – a trope familiar from place lore and earlier historical fiction, e.g. Andres Saal's *Vambola* (1889), that is increasingly revisited to this day in both literary and extra-literary contexts. Thus Lilli Luuk's critically acclaimed recent novel *Õöema* (Night Mother, 2024) employs a detailed and authentically depicted mire

setting that also serves as a hiding place, while an official from the Ministry of Climate greeted the Republic of Estonia's anniversary with a programmatic opinion piece "*Wetlands Are Security*", recalling the historical role of wetlands as refuge and specifically mentioning the large Alutaguse boglands close to Estonia's North-Eastern border (Zingel 2025).

As regards the *Noor-Eesti* albums, in the above-mentioned Kitzberg's play it is suggested that young serfs who have to flee from the manor lest they be sold to Latvia go into hiding. Father teaches the young couple: "Then, children, run to the Sussi Fen, this lies towards Riga. They say there are still old refuge huts standing upon a hillside. I know the way." (NE 1905: 119) It is onto a fen that the eponymous mentally anguished "dark child of man" disappears in Jaan Oks's story (NE 1912: 214), and it is in a bog that sheep thieves hide from their pursuers in Tuglas's *Vabadus ja surm* (Freedom and Death, NE 1915: 160). In this sense, the *Noor-Eesti* mires are certainly not places without any use, but as hideaways they can (and are even likely to) shelter those whose activities do not conform to social rules and who are suspicious or downright illegal, thus possibly undermining the social edifice in its entirety.

The liminal and the mystical mires

The capacity of the mire to harbour dark secrets leads us to the second subdivision of the proposed typology. Here, the mire serves as a liminal zone, a mystical Other. This is an internationally widespread notion: for instance, when speaking of the Irish bogs, Derek Gladwin claims that "when they are included in Irish literature and culture bogs often evoke Gothic associations through the mysterious, mesmerising and macabre" (Gladwin 2016: 2), and Karin Sanders (2017: 641–650) dedicates her discussion of liminality in Nordic literature to Danish bog fiction. In the Estonian case, this category is dominated by one outstanding sample – the novella *Jumala Saar. Torgla soo muinasjutt* (The Island of God. A Fairy Tale of the Torgla Fen) by Tuglas, essayist and author of prose fiction and the other outstanding ideologist of *Noor-Eesti* beside Suits. The mire here again functions as a refuge, in this case meaning a place where something ancient, supernatural and possibly evil may be preserved. It is an alternative space in which the rules of the dimension of ancient paganism are seeping through everyday reality:

The forest sighed and in this eternal moaning mires and bog pools burst into being, and, as centuries passed, grey cranes would stand on the banks of the water and sing their songs in a choir, resounding like trumpets.

And hawks came, perched on the black stumps reaching out of the water, and vainly admired themselves in the dark liquid mirror.

Torgla lived a great and profound life, as mysterious and obscure as itself. And there is an eternal struggle, birth and death in it.

Alone, divorced from the mainland, the Island of God stands among the old forest and quagmire. The blue of the tops of its oaks is visible from the bank but there is no road to guide one there. Only black posts stand in the deepest fen among the stunted pines, and it is along these that the path to the Island of God leads. But there is no one who would know the path. They rest in the ground. The white of the skulls of some is visible by Torgla's bogpools, and wolves have scattered their bones. (NE 1907: 12–13)

The horror of the mire is caused not only by the objective dangers it may pose (losing one's way, drowning, predatory animals), but also by the interpenetration of the everyday environment with the supernatural. The mire serves as a possible gateway to a temporally dislocated spacetime, or as a liminal borderland between different orders of reality that Gladwin (2016: 1–2) has observed when writing about Ireland's literary bogs that he for that reason considers as inherently Gothic spaces.

Retrospectively commenting on the genesis of his work, Tuglas (1966: 181–182) recalled that during the Christmas break of 1904/1905 he was reading Vladimir Korolenko's story *Les shumit* (The Forest is Soughing), which took over his imagination at the time, although the eventual extent of obvious borrowing was confined to the first sentence: "The forest was soughing." Also, as Korolenko's text contained a woodland spirit, it must have served as inspiration for the spirit of the fen in *The Island of God*. Tuglas feverishly worked on the novella for a month and a half, visualizing the ancient landscape – partly drawing on the nature from around his childhood home at Ahja in Southern Estonia, partly recalling his father's tales about grandfather who had been a forester. He also points out that subconsciously he must have been interpreting the romantic-revolutionary atmosphere of the era: "Everything around me was on fire and I was on fire myself" (Tuglas 1966: 182), and that it was at this moment that he abandoned his earlier realism in favour of a romantic approach. The symbolic quality of the bog and particularly its dramatic going up in flames seem relevant in the year of the 1905 revolution and the burning of manors. Tuglas himself was involved in the revolutionary events that led to his arrest and subsequent exile where he finished his manuscript. Thus, the conflagration of the mire also appears as a symbol of an old world order that is disappearing.

What is particularly significant in the context of the present article, however, is Tuglas' explicit admission that, without realizing this at the time, he turned out to be the first author to subconsciously employ the motif of the mire in Estonian literature, while other authors such as Suits and also Oskar Luts and Richard Roht would later use it consciously (Tuglas 1965: 182). The historical turmoil would pass, yet the dimension of the uncanny dread remained to haunt later literature. Mire depictions of a similar hue appear in works by the above-mentioned authors whose plotlines

otherwise do not dwell on the supernatural, and also vividly emerge in explicitly fantastic writing. Thus, August Gailit begins his short story *Libahunt* (Werewolf, 1926) as follows:

Behind thick forests and bogs, in the midst of the moaning Urgvee Bog lies my father's poor and wretched hut. It stands on the unstable ground like the others in that vast fen, covered with moss, boughs and stones, a little window opening on the fen like a narrowed eye. Cold grey mists rise from the fen as if from a steaming kettle and swirl above the people and their cabins.

The people living in Urgvee are known to be sorcerers and werewolves; it is a call to become a wolf in the fen that the protagonist submits to in Aino Kallas' Finnish-language Estonia-set *Sudenmorsja* (The Wolf's Bride, 1928). The horror- and fantasy-prone Gailit's work leads towards the gradually emerging genre of Estonian ethno-horror, suggested by today's author Indrek Hargla to be a truly Estonian phenomenon in the realm of fantasy and sci-fi (Helme 2018: 51). Pungas-Kohv (2016: 2132–2133) has discussed a few representatives of the genre who have a propensity for using more detailed bogland settings, including works by Hargla as well as ethno-horror's earlier, ground-breaking representative Herta Laipaik. The most sustained recent example of such use of the mire setting is played out in the Estonian region of Soomaa ("Fenland" in translation) in Mehis Heinsaar's 2022 novel *Kadunud hõim* (The Lost Tribe). The critic Jaan Sudak's review of Heinsaar's novel for international audiences is a telling example of currently established mire tropes. It contextualizes the novel, embracing the notions of liminality and the supernatural, recalls the role of mire as a space of refuge, and, above all, frames it as an aestheticized, inherently Estonian space:

Bogs are, to Estonians, a mysterious and threatening borderland; a breathtakingly beautiful wilderness full of unbridled forces. Will-o'-the-wisps bewitch wanderers, causing them to stray from their chosen path. For millennia, Estonians have sought sanctuary in bogs from great plagues and wars. (Sudak 2023: 46)

Thus Tuglas was certainly not mistaken to have acknowledged in the 1960s that he had introduced something new into Estonian fiction half a century earlier, although he had no way of predicting its persistence still half a century later.

Mystical and liminal bog scenes possibly involving supernatural elements did not remain confined to prose, but also emerged in poetry, where they were likely to display an eroticized atmosphere blending the forces of Eros and Thanatos. A remarkable example was the suggestive and ballad-like poem of warning and invitation *Soolaul* (The Swamp Song, 1928) by Estonia's leading woman poet Marie Under, followed by the love- and drowning-themed poems with fen and bog settings by the members of the 1930s group *Arbujad* (The Soothsayers). It was

Gustav Suits, though, who had impressively introduced the trope of mires into Estonian poetry, and in his case the main emphasis was rather on scathing social symbolism.

Symbols and society

Suits has been rightfully seen as the country's foremost symbolist poet, with his second collection *Tuulemaa* (Land of Wind, 1913) marking the style's definitive arrival on the Estonian literary scene. And, as Tuglas duly pointed out in his memoir, among other things Suits excels as someone who refined Tuglas's own intuitive application of the mire motif. His fen poem "*Soolaugastel*" (Pools in the Swamp, [1908] NE 1909: 213–214), that had been published in a Young Estonia album, was included in that groundbreaking book of poetry as was another remarkable fen poem "*Laul Eestist*" (The Song of Estonia, Suits 1913: 15–16). The mire in Suits's poetry from the *Noor-Eesti* period is a social symbol. The former poem has been translated into English by W. K. Matthews:

Pools in the Swamp

The surface of the swamps holds pools unnumbered.
Can it be rusty water that lies tongueless and still
Or mindless pain that stares with mute eyes that numb the will?

The surface of the swamps holds pools unnumbered.

Slow, silver bubbles globe upon the water.
O yearnings, secret wishes that hide in the swamp's night!
O dreams that blot out suddenly, failing in mid-flight!

Slow, silver bubbles globe upon the water.

Clowed to the earth, the stunted birches cower.
The treacherous virid floor of the swamp hollows and quakes
To straying feet, and the turbid glass of the water breaks.

Clawed to the earth, the stunted birches cover.

The live swamp teems with myriads of midges.
They fill the eyes and nostrils, and suck blood from the vein,
And choke desire, and creep into the heart, and daze the pain.

The live swamp teems with myriads of midges. (Suits 1953: 41)

A state of mind is conveyed that intermingles the predominantly personal with the suggested social, resulting in a "despairing symbolism" (Matthews 1950: 122). On the one hand, the landscape is depicted with an aestheticizing detachment of an external observer whose gaze encompasses the whole scene of multiple pools as if

from a higher vantage point¹⁰. On the other hand, the bodily presence encasing the central consciousness is underscored by the deeply experiential realistic incorporation of the hordes of midges that must have physically pestered any of Suits's readers who happened to have spent time outdoors in a natural environment – as Estonian countryside people were likely to. Still, instead of just allowing the insects serve as yet another embodied hardship on the list of plagues that harsh surroundings will heap on humans, even the midges become symbolic, appearing as a powerful metaphor for an embodied suffocation that pierces the whole body. The thwarted human condition as such was rendered in marshland imagery already in Johannes Aavik's translation from the Finnish author Juhani Aho, registering it as a bitter fate to be born as a stunted birch between two tussocks in a liquid fen (NE 1905: 183). In Suits' "*A Song of Estonia*", however, it is social criticism at its sharpest that becomes foregrounded: "History as horrible as an excretion, / a downtrampled, powerless breed, / crooked and hunched stunted birchs, / with roots and rootless in the muddy quagmire." (Suits 1913: 15). To use the assessment of Suits' translator Matthews, in this poem "his despair sounds its bitterest depths" (Matthews 1950: 120).

The dimension of social suffering and hopelessness enscribed in a marshy landscape can also be found in Jaan Oks's *Vaevade maa* (Land of Woes, NE 1915: 95): "Land of woes – land of poverty – land of hungers. The clouds are brooding on the tired fields with their sick pastures; forests decay into quagmires where the blubber of grass warms the roots of willows until even shoots of mosses die in the tarry water." In the same album that saw Oks's text in print, Aino Kallas points out in her article *Gustav Suits lüürikuna* (Gustav Suits as a Lyricist) that it is especially in poems such as the above that "Estonian landscape, Estonian soul begin to adopt an ever clearer outline side by side with a growing patriotic pessimism" (NE 1915: 175). I believe that what Kallas has detected here is the ultimate arrival in poetry of what Hennoste labelled "self-symbols" of Estonian literature.

Such takes on fens and bogs actually conveyed the reality of local scenery more accurately than the fairly standard or bland 19th-century tropes of *loci amoeni*. At the same time, they were harnessed in an internationally established tradition of employing fen-related metaphors in social criticism. The literary historian Herbert Salu, writing in exile in post-WWII Sweden, points out that the metaphor of a mire standing for bourgeois society was familiar from Romain Rolland's works *Vie de Beethoven* (Life of Beethoven, 1903) and *Jean-Christophe* (1904–1912) (Salu 1984: 143).

10 A comparable point of view overlooking a stretched-out bogscape covered with pools would later be occupied in Konrad Mägi's famous painting *Norwegian Landscape with a Pine* from the period 1908–1911.

The condemnation of the bourgeois society as a bog would be repeated after the cessation of the *Noor-Eesti* movement, in the Tarapita manifesto of 1921 signed by ten writers who also included Suits and Tuglas. In this text Salu (1984: 142) detects similarities with the lexicon of the Clarté movement in France (1919–1921), including the bog trope. And the scathingly critical manifestoes written by the poet Henrik Visnapuu in 1919 in which he states: “The life river of our people finds itself unavoidably in a mire. – What stood in front of us was an eternally gurgling fen with its rotting depths” (quoted in Salu 1984: 147) were, in Salu’s estimation, directly drawing on Suits’s images. As concerns other material published in the *Noor-Eesti* albums, Eduard Vilde (NE 1909: 107) uses an extended metaphor of the bog seething with imaginary gross invertebrates to convey disgust with the depraved debauchery of the bourgeoisie.

The power and potency of Suits’s poetic mires as tools of social criticism is maybe most tellingly indicated by the incorporation of his line “The surface of the swamps holds pools unnumbered” in the poem “*Soolaulikud*” (Swamp Bards) by the Soviet Estonian poet Juhan Schmuul (Smuul) published in 1950 in the newspaper *Sirp ja Vasar* (Sickle and Hammer). It appeared on a special page topped by the current party-line slogan: “Writers and artists, fight for the implementation of the Stalinist plan for the transformation of nature!”. The line from Suits appears as a refrain in the poem “*Swamp Bards*” whose first part comments on the oppressed life in pre-war independent Estonia, where “[s]wamp dispirits, swamp reigns, swamp destroys” – a state of things which, as the second part promises, would of course be effectively abolished by the implementation of the said plan, which in Estonia predominantly meant draining of mires.¹¹ Nevertheless, this denouncement paradoxically meant a repeated and explicit, although anonymous, reference to the banned and discredited “bourgeois” author Suits (who at the time lived in exile in Sweden) – and obviously expected the Soviet readership to recognize and to resonate with the line.

Bogs, fens and nature writing The albums included not only original texts by Estonian writers, but also translations among which the French *fin-de-siècle* was characteristically prominent. Kaia Sisask (2019: 63) has found that the selected texts illustrate the main keywords of symbolism, aiming to evoke dark, vague and musical sensations, but also surmises that the texts’ suitability into the framework

11 For instance, mire-draining is the central Soviet feat in Hans Leberecht’s Stalin-prize-winning novel *Valgus Koordis* (Light at Koordi, 1948), the Estonian Stalinist literary work *par excellence* that was also adapted into a film in 1951.

of Estonian nature poetry may have been a factor supporting the selection. As a side note it may be pointed out here that Suits explicitly introduced a bog pool into his translation of Paul Verlaine's poem "*La lune blanche*" (The White Moon) – a move which certainly resonates with his own imagery: "*L'étang reflète, / Profond miroir*" is translated as "*Kui sügav peegel / soosilm täis vett*" [As a deep mirror, / a fen pool full of water] (NE 1909: 2).

Thus, nature as the Young Estonians knew it need not have been far from them even at their most cultured, refined and European-trending. So its presence appears in Bernard Linde's story *Hallid juuksed* (Grey Hair) in which a character is experiencing boredom at another's monotonous speech which for him resembles the expanse of a wetland:

Just like an uneven low-lying land where only high marsh grasses, branches of bog bilberries in scattered bushes of crooked birch, and stakes of spruce and pine grow, behind which long-legged and long-necked swamp birds scarcely can hide – thus flowed Jürgenson's speech. [...] John listened. Initially his thought, just like a gaze upon a fen landscape, could not rest on anything – everything was uniformly flat. (NE 1909: 250).

The extended metaphor indicates the character's, and by extension the author's, deep familiarity with this type of landscape and testifies to his ability to draw on a remembered experience that obviously has been lived through and stored at the back of his mind, which materializes in a fragment of credible nature writing.

A similar knowledge of nature is manifested in the details of the texts by Tuglas. For instance, his story *Asuja* (The Settler) opens with a scene depicting a primordial "wilderness":

Before, only ancient forest had been soughing here whose heart was but rarely touched by the feet of a living man, where only wild animals roamed and caught their prey. Across dozens of miles stretched a long wild domain with its dark thickets, sturdy pines, bent juniper bushes and squishy mossy fens inaccessible to larger animals, where only birds of prey lived as did long-legged storks who caught frogs while splashing around in the deep waters from spring to autumn and built their nests on top of the trees growing on the scattered fen islands. All manner of snipes, curlews, wild geese and ducks appeared here in great numbers and in the autumn they flew back towards the south in long lines under the grey sky. (NE 1905: 21).

What is particularly attention-worthy here is the fact that, although the author does not name a particular species, it is clear that he is aware of the habits of the "symbol of Estonian wilderness", the rare black stork who indeed builds its nest on top of preferably old trees close to swamps and bodies of water in large forests, keeping away from human habitation – unlike white storks who prefer cultivated lands, or cranes whose nests are on the ground.

Even though such passages may be meant to serve as scenes evoking a

hypothetical virgin wood before the arrival of humans, they do not seem to be purely relying on imagination. Tuglas's work can be read as approaching nature writing by someone familiar with Estonian countryside and its non-human inhabitants, especially when considering the ecocritic Lawrence Buell's claim that in nature writing "[the] nonhuman environment is present not merely as a framing device but as a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history" (Buell 1995: 7). This can be suggested even despite the fact that Tuglas's sustained literary efforts in constructing natural scenery were later criticized for their continuity errors by Juhan Luiga, a doctor and man of letters. Luiga himself also contributed to the Estonian literary mire discourse in an interesting way. In 1908, the year following the publication of Tuglas's *The Island of God*, Luiga published an essay entitled "*Soo hing*" (The Soul of the Fen) that approaches mires from a virtually scientific perspective. Contrary to contemporary dreams of melioration, Luiga ([1908] 1995: 552) deems mires too much of a hassle to be cultivated, which is precisely the reason why they are worth visiting. For him, they are basically interconnected ecosystems that grow their own flowers, their own plants "that the mire has re-fashioned according to its own character" (Luiga [1908] 1995: 553), and thus have agency as well as constitute a realm deserving closer study.

The following decades of the 1920s and 1930s would produce a wave of non-fictional nature writing that to a great degree involved detailed observations of plants and birds (see Maran, Tüür 2016: 287). Several passages from Young Estonians would not seem out of place in the works by Kustas Põldmaa, whose *Kodumets* (Home Forest) appeared in 1937 and contained a chapter on children's risky trip across a fen, or Johannes Piiper whose classic *Pilte ja hääli kodumaa loodusest* (Pictures and Sounds from the Nature of Homeland) came out in 1935. Both of these authors, whose above-mentioned works were incidentally given out by the *Noor-Eesti* Publishers, are noted for their aestheticizing approach to nature and were instrumental in consolidating the genre of nature writing in Estonian literature. The works of the Young Estonians published a couple of decades earlier had most certainly been available to them, likely providing the vantage points for the appreciation of nature's charms that Suits had listed among the movement's contributions to Estonian literature and culture.

Conclusion

In the 21st century it may seem that the presence of the mire, comprising both fens and bogs, is an established feature in the Estonian cultural self-imaginary. However, if we look further into the past, it appears that its status as an "officially recognized" landscape supporting the image of Estonians as a "nature

people" does not seem to reach back particularly far – the connotations of mires in people's minds have for a long time mostly been negative, and bogs and fens used to be assigned the role of an antagonist in texts that juxtapose humans with nature or seek to establish human mastery over it. Nevertheless, it may be suggested that the seeds for various variations of today's image of the mire in different literary genres were sown already in the early 20th century by the Young Estonia movement. It also appears that the group's main ideologists Gustav Suits and Friedebert Tuglas were actually aware of the movement's novel approach to Estonian land- and waterscapes in general and to mires in particular.

Since then, in addition to the pragmatic takes on the mire from the perspective of country-dwelling peasants that appear in 19th-century literary realism, mythologizing views on bogs and fens seen as liminal places of mysticism and the supernatural have led towards the contemporary fascination with folk horror. The mire has been symbolically used in ideologically loaded discourse to denote social ills and shortcomings, amounting to a literary "self-symbol", yet also approached with curiosity and a keen sense of aestheticism by authors who have been focusing on features of the actual landscape, comprising nature writing. Among this rich legacy, it is particularly the strains of the fantastic and the ecological that seem to flourish a hundred years later, as the pragmatic agricultural evaluations and evocative imagery of ideological criticism (that was clearly also related to denigrating value judgements passed on mires) appear to have become (at least to a certain extent) *passé*. Today's pragmatic take would rather be an ecological one, valuing mires as carbon sinks and sources of biodiversity, or a monetized one deriving from the tourist industry and seeking out the most marketable features of mires (Pungas-Kohv et al. 2015). Mire landscapes deserve attention as providers of ecosystem services and are valued from an environmental perspective as complex systems of biodiversity in their own right.

Writing on non-human spatiality in fiction, Michael Karlsson Pedersen has proposed "a clear-cut division between literature oriented toward the human and literature oriented toward the nonhuman" (Pedersen 2022: 52). To use the terminology that Pedersen draws from the sci-fi author Ursula LeGuin, the literary mire discourse initiated by the Young Estonia currently seems to be faring better in the category of the *fantastic-ecocentric* than in the realm of *realistic-anthropocentric*. LeGuin has pointed out that interest in the non-human leads literature away from realism, which means uniting genres such as sci-fi, fantasy and horror on the one hand, and regional or nature-oriented writing that values landscape as humankind's Other on the other hand (ibid.). A development of mires from an objectified backdrop over which the human narrative may preside towards their greater autonomy

and even agency accompanies the departure from literary realism through the successive *Noor-Eesti* albums.

To return to the cross-Baltic survey mentioned at the beginning of this article, it might also be worth the while observing comparatively the roles that the arising of literary modernisms and the tumultuous history of the 20th century have played in fashioning national landscape imaginaries in the respective literatures of the Baltic countries, specifically as concerns wetlands whose importance in the climate crisis is ever increasing. As Karin Sanders has put it: “[B]ogs, swamps, and wetlands have served as eco-libraries full of stories to be dug out and read” (Sanders 2017: 643).

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