

# THOSE WHO LOVE (in) THE WOODS

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Estonians are often said to be *forest people*, the ones who have, from ancient times, been able to live in harmony with and understand their natural environment – mostly the woods. This idea has been employed in a number of interpretations of Estonian folklore and folk beliefs (Oskar Loorits, Uku Masing, Jaan Kaplinski), as a rule in connection with a referral to our Finno-Ugric or boreal cultural background. More recently, this idea has been used (somewhat playfully) in the formation of the ideological basis for an artistic movement called ethnofuturism. Besides promoting local dialect-based cultures in Estonia, it has been striving to re-establish the ancient cultural contacts between the representatives of the Finno-Ugric people. A number of works on present-day rural life in Estonia by researchers from the Estonian Agricultural University (e.g. Argo Moor, Tiit Merenäkk) also heavily rely on the imagery of Estonians as the forest people.

Besides the images of forest people stemming from our distant past, the idea of the forest as a safe place, as a refuge for those seeking freedom, has been activated several times in Estonian history during the 20th century. An important period is WW II and the post-war years when a number of Estonian men hid in the woods and fought a guerrilla war against the foreign invaders. They were called, in the literal translation, "forest brothers." The most recent and probably most widely known analogous case is that of the Voitka brothers. They escaped to the Southern Estonian woods to avoid being drafted into the Soviet army in 1986 and never voluntarily came out. When they were arrested in 2000, they immediately became cultural heroes and the myth of Estonians as the forest people once again became eagerly exploited in our mass media as well as in the entertainment industry.

The latter examples show, however, that modern Estonians have not exactly gone to live in the woods voluntarily, but only in case of extreme need. This

situation may have been different during the earlier periods of our history, but the attempt to analyse the ancient Estonians' ideas about the forest would be too large a task to tackle here. It has been somewhat touched upon in Õnne Kepp's article, "Forest and the idea of forest in classical Estonian lyrical poetry: sources, classification, individuality" (Kepp 1999: 345–369). An ethnographer, Ants Viires, also referred to in Kepp's article, has depicted Estonians as forest people in his books, *Puud ja inimesed* ("Trees and People," 1975) and *Seitsme maa ja seitsme mere taha* ("Beyond the Seven Seas and Seven Lands," 1991).

However, if we are to search for "written proof" of the image of forest people from our fiction, not much is to be found. From the earliest period of original fiction written in the Estonian language we have, for example, Eduard Bornhöhe's *Tasuja* ("The Revenger," 1880), which contains some scenes set in nature, written in the spirit of the romantic pastoral. Aino Kallas's story, *Hundimõrsja* ("Wolf's Bride," 1928), romanticises and dramatises the protagonist's (forbidden) passion for freedom that she finds in the wild, natural environment. From productions of modern authors, some novels and stories can be named where the events important from the point of the story's development are set in the forest, like Veera Saar's *Ukuaru*, 1976, or Mats Traat's *Puud olid, puud olid hellad velled* ("Trees, Trees Were the Tender Brothers," 1979). In addition, there are Nikolai Baturin's novels set in the Siberian wilderness and some works by the ethnofuturists, the most prominent of these definitely being Kauksi Ülle. These are mentioned here as examples which, from the article's author's subjective point of view, most obviously treat the Estonians' relationship with the forest; the list is indeed far from being complete. Instead of discussing aspects of *nature-life*, it may be said that most of the canonised Estonian peasant prose is firmly fixed to the farmyard and/or village settings. Action set in the woods is willingly avoided by the characters – and writers – of the novels depicting Estonian countryside inhabitants.

An exception in that sense is A.H. Tammsaare's novel, *Kõrboja peremees* ("Farmkeeper of Kõrboja," 1922). It tells a story of a young man, Villu, and the difficult decisions that he has to make concerning his status as an independent farmkeeper. This question is directly related to his relationships with two women, a neighbouring farm-owner's only daughter, Anna, and a poor cottager, Eevi, who is also the mother of Villu's son. The village where the story is set is described as a remote "forest corner." The events take place during one summer

soon after the Estonian War for Independence (1918–1920), with some reminders of the happenings ten years ago and those of the previous summer. All the events are, however, related to one location only: the village in the middle of the woods. Everything that has happened earlier or outside this circle is only referred to in connection with some particular places or natural objects (trees, islets in the bog). The elements of the natural environment convey the memories of the past events and play an active role in directing the course of the action.

The landscape that is represented in *Farmkeeper of Kõrboja* is much inspired by the real landscapes in Northern Estonia, Kuusalu parish. According to the explanatory article added to the novel's 5th issue, the writer had got the impulse for writing the novel from the view opening from a hill by Lake Paukjärv, "on one side rising the powerful pine woods, creating a romantic atmosphere, and on the other side spreading the bare marsh that looked realistic" (Elisto 1958: 172). The provisional idea for the novel had been a tragic love story that should have ended with the protagonist's suicide in a bog pool. The protagonist was planned to be a young and a bit wild village girl with a mocking name, *Mets-Jeesuke* (Forest-Jesus) (Treier 1994: 1561–1568). The double entendre to the notion of wilderness has thus been essential to the story from its first version already (the Estonian word for 'wild', *metsik*, is etymologically related to the substantive *mets*, 'forest'). As we can see in the following, 'forest' has preserved its double meaning in the final result as well, being one of the organising principles of the novel's structure.

The village in *Farmkeeper of Kõrboja* represents a typical Estonian dispersed settlement. It is possible to draw a rather coherent map of the settings according to the remarks on places given in the text (see Fig. 1). Not all the fictional worlds yield "mapping" that easily. It would be tempting to read the landscapes in the text mimetically (see Karjalainen 1998: 9), focusing on how precisely the novel's text represents the real-world landscapes. For several reasons, this approach has been left aside in the following, partly because it would require a more profound knowledge of the prototype landscapes and also because the landscapes have certainly changed over the 80 years that have passed from the time the novel was written. The map of the novel's fictional world has been taken as a basis for the following analysis.

One of the central elements in the setting is the lake. Its shore is the place of Villu's and Anna's meetings. Not so much the lake itself, but the forest sur-

rounding it is of great significance in understanding the novel's dynamics. Placing the characters onto the lakeshore enables the writer to make them see the forest from a distance and consequently relate Villu's fate to it. The first landscape descriptions that are given in the book follow Villu's way from his home to the lake: he runs across the fields and through the gate in the fence surrounding it, into the woods. On the sandy road leading to the neighbouring farms he slows down as he notices strange footprints. A lengthy explanation follows about Villu's passion for noticing and interpreting various signs of the natural environment, an art he is outstandingly good at. Obtaining information from the smallest details in his surroundings provides useful knowledge as well as fun for Villu. As he knows the landscape around the lake very well, he is even able to detect how well the owner of the footprints herself would know the place.

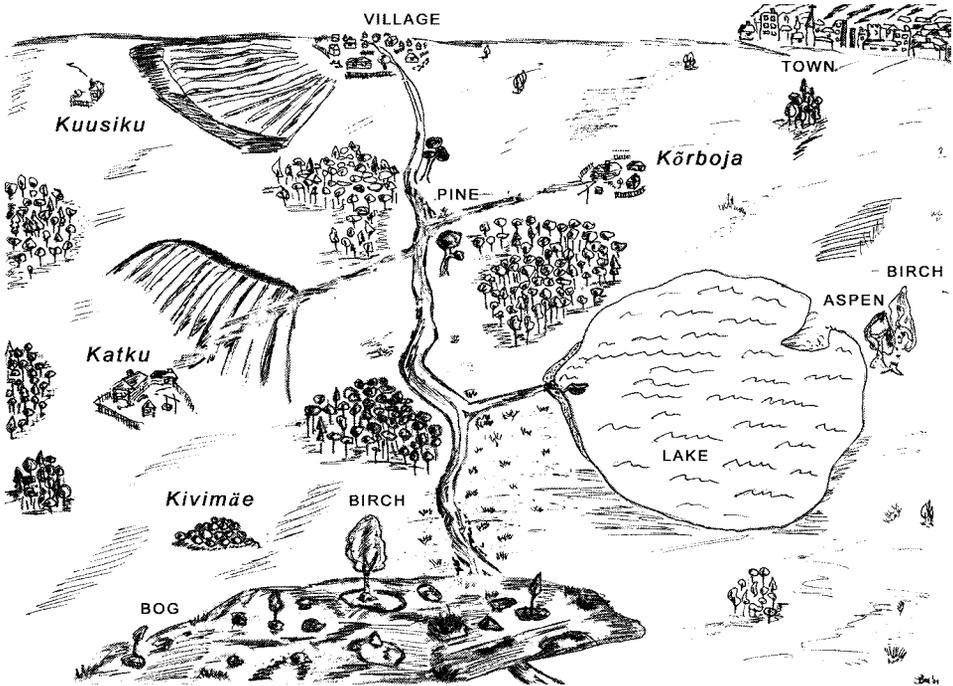


Figure 1. The map of the farms and their surroundings in *Farmkeeper of Kõrboja*.

For Villu, the landscapes become alive through interpreting the signs that he can spot. In contrast, for the local people who are constantly living in the same place, such as Villu's parents, time and space get their meaning through routine farm work and village life. For example, Villu's mother remembers her son's date of

birth as being "right during the time when the herding season starts" (KP<sup>1</sup> 17). The space is primarily understood in terms of human work and interaction. When Villu asks his mother about the people who might have been at the lake, she immediately relates the lakeshore with the young villagers' parties and quarrels, one of which has also caused his son's imprisonment. The lakeshore is meaningful for her only through the events that have taken place there, not as a place in itself. In that sense Villu is different from all the rest of the characters of the novel: he understands the environment not only as the realm of human significance, but as containing "natural" information as well.

His relationship with the forest therefore also differs from that of the other villagers. For the farmers, like Villu's father, only work that has evident results and consequently the places where it is possible to perform such work are meaningful. If anything is done outside the circle of the farm's fields and hay grounds, it needs to have a pragmatic reason. The villagers' interest in the forest is also pragmatic: the only scene where everyone goes into the forest is during the so-called hazelnut-feast. The villagers go to the forest collectively to pick hazelnuts because "otherwise it would have been easily possible that one's portion of hazelnuts had remained in the forest, had fallen on the ground without anyone to pick it, for mice to eat" (KP 134). At the same time, it is an opportunity for the younger villagers to come together and have fun, but it anyhow needs to be "covered up" by the argument that it is an undertaking resulting in a tangible benefit.

For Villu, the forest conveys a meaning of freedom, wandering, adventure. For him it is the possibility to cross the limits set by the community; to step outside of the reach of narrow human rules. He uses the forest for performing illegal acts such as poaching or making "moonshine," but the forest means more to him than only an environment empty of his fellow human beings. It is an environment he knows how to interpret: a collection of signs that he can always rely on, as he notices them. This is an important aspect that must also be kept in mind when trying to explain Villu's suicide at the end of the story: when his eyesight does not allow him to "read" the forest any more, he is deprived of the most meaningful part of his life.

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<sup>1</sup> A.H. Tammsaare, *Kõrboja peremees*. Tallinn: Eesti Riiklik Kirjastus 1958.

During his wanderings in the woods Villu has the gun with him to "reconcile" the villagers. It signals that his trips might, after all, have a practical reason – i.e. hunting, providing the family with food. Villu's own relationship with the forest is not actually pragmatic, but rather spiritual. The novel starts with his first morning back at home, freed from prison, described as follows, "in his body he sensed some kind of sweet pain, like he had sensed many years ago, when he had thought of going hunting, fishing or picking berries together with the others somewhere deeper in the woods" (KP 5).

What means freedom for Villu connotes wildness for the rest of the villagers. Throughout the text Villu's character is referred to as wild, impetuous, unpredictable. It is first expressed in his mother's thoughts when she observes her son running towards the forest: she knows that Villu has lost his right eye in the woods, and she is afraid that such wildness may hurt the others, but first of all, her son himself. However, she, as a mother, does not want to attach wildness as a negative quality to her son, but she relates it to Kõrboja Anna. Speaking of Anna as a potential old maid, she uses the expression "to have the wolf's stink about" (as opposed to the young maidens traditionally referred to as "lambs"). She also associates Anna with Villu's most dangerous undertakings in the forests, recalling how Villu "roamed around with Anna, and did not stop before he had got rid of his eye" (KP 20).

Although Villu's mother prefers to think of Anna as the representative of all that is wild and dangerous, it is and remains Villu's realm. The peasants' image of the forest as a wild and dangerous place is extended to Villu's personal character, as he is the one who is in contact with the forest more than the rest of the villagers. Anna, regardless of Villu's mother's associations, is presented to the reader mainly in connection with all sorts of roads and vehicles. The earliest indications of her presence are the footprints on the road connecting the more remote farms with the rest of the village. Her walking has not had any practical purpose; she has just been going to the lake to look at the landscape. It indicates that she is not as "local" as the rest of the villagers. Rather, by her usage of the space she will remain in a somewhat distant position, separate from the landscapes filled with meaningful work.

The metaphor of road describes well such "inbetweenness." Throughout the novel, Anna is always presented as being in motion. When she is not walking or running, she appears in connection with some means of transportation (horse

cart, boat, train). Anna is the only one of the characters to use as modern and fast a way of travelling as a train. Anna is used to coming and going, it is a normal part of her life. That makes her different from the other villagers, but her distinctiveness is not similar to Villu's. It does not have to do with the forest, but with roads. Anna tells her father that the most important memory that she has in association with Kõrboja is actually their first trip to the place, the event of moving. Her father, too, associates her namely with *road*: when waiting for Anna to come home, he listens to the sounds that come from the road. By a special rattling noise he knows that the cart would then be at a big pine tree near the crossroads, driving over the tree roots. By having located Anna on the road he knows that she should be home soon.

One of the most important discussions between Anna and Villu takes place on the road – when they are going from the lake to Kivimäe where Villu wants to blow up some stones with dynamite, in honour of Anna's birthday. It ends with a disaster that could be interpreted as a collision of Villu's and Anna's worlds – the constant movement characteristic of Anna's chronotope does not fit Villu's "forest-wildness," and the conflict is born.

Their symbolic ways of using space are too different to reconcile and that is one of the reasons that creates the tragedy. Anna chooses to go to the road in the moment of her biggest spiritual confusion, when she hears of Villu's death. She is about to leave the place never to come back, but the meeting with Eevi who is sitting under a tree by the roadside changes her mind. This, too, can be interpreted as a merging of two worlds, two chronotopes. This time the result is positive; Anna's road has led her to see something stable in the world.

Trees, not only in the metaphorical sense, play an important role in the world of *Farmkeeper of Kõrboja*. All three main characters are related to several trees which play significant roles in their lives. Eevi is found sitting on the roots of a pine tree at the crossroads near Villu's home the morning after his death. Once before they have been sitting together with Villu on the roots of a fir tree near Eevi's hut like two outcasts, two wolves. Eevi's status in the village community is marginal and this is symbolically emphasised in her cottage's location at the edge of the forest, at some distance from other houses. The motive of going to live "under a fir tree" is brought up in a conversation between Villu and his father, too. Villu claims that he would be ready to give up living at home without any particular place to go, but for him this still remains an empty phrase. After

her mother's and Villu's death, this is literally a real perspective for Eevi. Only after meeting Anna does she get the possibility to go to live somewhere other than "under a fir tree," as the saying in Estonian goes.

When Villu clearly realises that his eyesight is almost completely gone, it happens in connection with a tree. He is sitting by the lake with Anna, and she asks if he can see the red aspen among the dark green pines on the opposite side of the lake. For Anna the tree signifies a memory from their common youth. For Villu, as he can not distinguish it from a distance where he had earlier been able to spot animals behind the trees, its meaning is much more actual and bitter: he can not see anymore. Ironically, an old birch tree grows right next to the aspen that both of them also remember so well: that is the tree under which Villu has lost his right eye. As he reveals to Anna in the same scene, it was the girl herself who had caused the accident. So both trees are related to Villu's blindness, the birch as the witness of its beginning, the aspen – its end.

Villu's sharp attention and his ability to interpret the natural landscape, especially the most complicated environments, forests, have been emphasised from the very beginning of the story. In the opening page of the novel we find a thorough and ornithologically precise account of the various song-birds that can be found around the house, indicating Villu's knowledge obtained by observing. Little detailed descriptions of the natural environment here and there in the text only strengthen this image. Villu's ability to analyse landscapes in general, too, is demonstrated in connection with his search for better soils for farming.

But after losing his eyesight, the forest appears dark and unintelligible to him; he misses not only the smallest details of his environment, but he is not even able to spot big animals among the trees, he would not be able to go hunting again. His "wild" freedom is taken from him. Villu discovers that he is not able to relate to the landscape of his most intimate memories any more. This is the breaking point of his spirits. From this point on, the whole of life has no meaning for him anymore. The essential contact with his favourite environment – the forest – is lost, but Villu cannot live without it, restricted to a very limited farmyard-circle. His love of the forest is the reason for his suicide at least as much as his love and his pride connected with the two women are.

As a conclusion it may be said that in the novel *Farmkeeper of Kõrboja*, the *forest* is not a random setting, but it is intertwined with memories, events, action. It participates in and directs the lives of the characters. This is evident in both

the pragmatic (hunting, picking hazelnuts and berries) and in the symbolic level (forest as a special place for expressing one's individuality; elements of the environment as emblems for the protagonists) of meaning. The forest landscapes in this particular novel serve the interests and the logic of the story development rather than promote the idea of Estonians as those who love the woods. Villu is an exception who dies when he is deprived of his contact with the forest, but it would not be so in the case of the rest of the characters. In the case of this novel, the people just happen to love *in* the woods.

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