

# GARDENS and RIVERS: Urban Nature in Tõnu Õnnepalu's Novels

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## Introduction: nature and literature

Eco-criticism as a branch of literary studies has most often been defined as 'the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment' (Glotfelty 1996: xviii) where 'environment' has mainly been regarded as green/wild/natural spaces. As for literature, it generally has focused on such things as narratives of the wilderness experience. However, a number of eco-critics have found this too limiting a practice. The editors of the collection *Beyond Nature Writing* have stated:

Environment need not only refer to 'natural' or 'wilderness' areas ... environment also includes cultivated and built landscapes, the natural elements and aspects of those landscapes, and cultural interactions with those natural elements. (Wallace, Armbruster 2001: 4.)

In the following, an attempt is made to point out some problems connected with the meaning of natural elements in city space, as represented in contemporary Estonian fiction. The particular material that has been chosen to illustrate the culture-specificity of the meanings that urban nature may convey is a selection of prose texts by an Estonian contemporary writer, Tõnu Õnnepalu (writing also under the pseudonyms of Emil Tode and Anton Nigov). He is one of the most representative contemporary authors of Estonian literature, his several novels having been translated into major European languages. The novels *Border State* (*Piiririik*, 1993; in English 2000), *Price* (*Hind*, 1995) and *Princess* (*Printsess*, 1997) serve as sources for urban nature descriptions here. A botanist by training, he represents not only an aesthetically, but also a scientifically, sensitive approach to city nature in his oeuvre. Estonian critics have pointed out the elaborate embeddedness of the natural elements in the meaning-creating mechanisms of his texts, 'Nature lies behind everything, under everything, above everything. Nature

is the source of beauty and language, it is the analogy of human life, the central actuator of thoughts and the site for longing for the ideal: to be a plant.’ (Hennoste 2003: 270.)<sup>1</sup> Above the subtle ‘nature’, Hennoste refers to on the surface of the texts, there are several problems connected with society, sexuality, death and guilt. Central to his novels is usually some young post-socialist character facing the ‘brave new world’ in the West. Desire, fear and disgust mingle in the characters’ attitudes towards Western cities and their inhabitants. The cultural clash and ambiguity created by different environments is well present in the descriptions of urban landscapes in these novels.

The novel *Price* starts with a depiction of the capital of ‘a small state’, evidently Tallinn: ‘Driving up to the bridge, the tram gains speed as always, rushing at an unexpected speed from the darkness below, between the houses, into the feast of the morning sun.’ Below, there are railway tracks, ‘...ugly railway-wastelands, where weeds grow through rusty iron waste, paper scraps are lying on the ground, white as scattered bones, empty bottles reflect the light...’ (Õnnepalu 1995: 19). It is a cityscape where wild natural elements are living a life of their own, undisturbed. Although the scene is observed in a marginal area, around railway tracks, the sight is located in the central area of the city. The disorderly place is depicted as full of dirty vitality, which is sharply contrasted with the neutered sterility of the built environment, implying that the wild would have the power to take over the orderly city – if it cared. Only neglect helps to maintain the balance. Thus, the city is far from being a safe haven, a domain where man-made rules apply and determine the course of events. The borders of the city do not hold firm.

The experience of the environment that interferes with humans’ lives can be associated with the notion of a lived, as opposed to observed, environment or ‘landscape’. Edward Relph in his classic *Place and Placelessness* explains the difference between place and landscape as follows, ‘Although this is a complex conception of place as possessing intangible qualities and changing through time, the suggestion is that, above all, place has a physical, visual form – a landscape.’ (Relph 1976: 30.) Whereas landscape consists of clearly distinct and publicly observable features accessible to travellers and insiders alike, being thus predominantly visual, place as a lived entity requires the inclusion of other senses, as well as the dimension of time, in the description.

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<sup>1</sup> All translations from Estonian by the author of the article, except quotations from *Border State*.

In contrast to the above-quoted examples, where city nature has the capacity to take possession of the human senses in their integrity, most of the descriptions of the Western environment in Önnepalu's novels are two-dimensional, given as views from a window (significantly, often from a car or train window). *Princess* starts with a negative statement about the observed landscape: 'The mountains are invisible. Fog is so thick.' (Tode 1997: 5.) The primacy of visual, detached perception is stressed throughout the book: 'We are driving towards Munich at a reasonable speed. Nice stoutish Bayer landscape.' (Tode 1997: 7.) A car is actually one of the central agents in *Princess*: the fleeing of the main characters to the West is induced by a car accident. The car as the main evidence of the crime continues to be the focal point of reference for the protagonist, under the surface of events and recollections, throughout the novel.

The 'car-perspective' could be extended to a metaphorical explanation of the protagonist's sense of being trapped on the surface of Western landscapes, and not being able to penetrate them to the dimension of depth, regardless of her several attempts to do so. After she has tried to walk through the reeds lining the shore of the lake, which were previously described as 'decoration' or 'picture', the protagonist falls ill (the reader is not informed whether the cause is psychosomatic or simply cold water and wet feet). At the end of the novel, the protagonist takes a trip to the mountains mentioned in the first sentence of the book. She has watched them from her window as if they were a slide projected on her room and consciousness. Out there in the mountains, the smell of the dead grass and sound of a cuckoo adhere to the picture, but 'it sounded strange and even somewhat eerie there against the view: snow, rocks, firs' (Tode 1997: 138).

In addition, it is interesting that the 'view from a window' is a preferred way to perceive the world for most of Önnepalu's characters, regardless of their geographical location. In *Princess* the contrast between looking at and being in the natural environment corresponds to the protagonist's experiences respectively in the West and East.

In a recent academic reference book on Estonian literary history, the physical and mental environment of Önnepalu's novels has been characterised as follows:

In the home town of the first person narrator there are bumpy streets, grey houses, some of them half-burned; cold wind and bitter salty sand; air filled with screaming gulls. Nature rampantly grows, unhampered – it is a wild, but fascinating place. The quality of fascination is indeed created by its distance from the Western clean, clear,

sterile, idea of beauty, against which the eastern ferocity seems exciting.... (Annus 2001: 659.)

However, after closer examination of the text, it turns out that such a binary system of opposing the 'wild east' to the 'sterile west' does not work; the nature of the landscapes of East and West is far more complicated. The qualities opposed are not easily separable from one another: contradictory qualities can be experienced simultaneously. The urge to leave, the decision to stay, and the disappointment upon arrival are the narrator's intermingled feelings, which connect the seemingly very different urban environments.

Metaphors embody values, as the American environmental aesthetician Arnold Berleant writes: 'They are judgements just as much when hidden behind figurative language as when they are displayed openly.' (Berleant 2000: 31.) Analysing the depictions of city nature in novels may then reveal relevant information about the values embodied in the contemporary urban environment.

### **City as a form of dwelling**

The city as a man-made environment, where virtually everything is subjected to the human mind and will, is a form of dwelling that most radically influences, or deforms the natural grounds on which it stands. In colloquial use, 'city' as a concept is often opposed to 'nature', or, more specifically, wilderness areas. The latter is regarded as a realm separate and at a distance from everyday human life. We are used to 'going out to nature' for some time, in order to contentedly return, after a while, to the 'culturally organised' environment.

However, elements of natural origin also appear in the city: water bodies, plants, ground formations etc. In the city, these natural phenomena are in a special position: their 'natural' condition is subjected to particular cultural norms, according to which the city is being built. Human activity, in whatever form, always tends to organise, but at the same time, also to simplify the naturally diverse environment it conceptualises. By 'culturising' the environment, by making paths into it, dividing it up and naming its separate parts, humans exercise symbolic power over the landscape. As Yi-Fu Tuan has stressed, gardens (as well as other related forms of nature that are arranged for aesthetic purposes) 'mirror certain cosmic values and environmental attitudes' (Tuan 1990: 138). The way city nature is arranged reflects the cultural peculiarities of the inhabitants of the city, as aes-

thetic perception and taste tend to be rather culture-specific. Literature is one of the means to convey information about this phenomenon.

The city can be regarded as the area of cultural concentration where natural randomness is minimised (Randviir 2000: 136). From the beginning of the history of cities, one of the most important features of them has been the existence of firm surrounding borders. The 'heart' of the city was encircled by the city wall that demarcated a physical as well as mental barrier between 'us' and 'the strange', between civilisation and barbarity. As Yi-Fu Tuan writes, the city's aim is to liberate 'its citizens from the need for incessant toil to maintain their bodies and from the feeling of impotence before nature's vagaries' (Tuan 1990: 150). At the same time, it is inevitable that at the foundation of city experience always lies nature, in the form of ground and climate as well as in the form of the biological human body that physically experiences the space (see Lehari 2000: 129). Also cities themselves are conditioned by natural circumstances that often determine their location. Indeed, there are examples of cities that have been established in spite of their natural conditions.

Eco-critic Christopher Manes has pointed out that even several ecologically minded thinkers of the 20th century have expressed the idea of human culture as a 'second nature', which should give us 'not only the right but the duty to alter, shape and control 'first nature' (the nonhuman world)' (Manes 1996: 23). The city can be thought of as the material manifestation of such an idea: it is man-made structure built upon 'first nature', in the course of which 'first nature' often is oppressed and suffocated (see for example Rendell 2003: 227–232). Such a hierarchical understanding of the nature–human relationship is considered immoral by Manes. On empirical grounds, if we take a closer look at city landscapes, we see the 'first nature' penetrating the 'second' at every step, even literally, be it in the form of dandelions growing through asphalt, or even cockroaches in the kitchen. However, in the city, green nature is generally subjected to the human will in the form of gardens, parks, alleys, or even trees and small patches of forest between big residential buildings, as for example in Finnish 'forest cities'.

Another American eco-critic, William Howarth, has observed that 'although we cast nature and culture as opposites, in fact they constantly mingle, like water and soil in a flowing stream' (Howarth 1996: 69). The same holds true for the relationship of nature and city: although a city is a form of dwelling subjected, to a remarkable extent, to human/cultural premises, it may attempt to control the

natural aspects within its limits, but it cannot exclude them. On the other hand, the design and plotting of urban nature always contains references to governing ideologies and power relations (Lehari 1997: 39).

The city often appears as a constituent of some wider metaphorical understanding. Arnold Berleant in his article 'The Wilderness City: An essay on metaphorical experience' points out that some metaphors are prevailingly optimistic in nature, whereas others convey mostly negative imagery: for example, the garden city or forest city as contrasted with the machine city or wilderness city (Berleant 2000: 29). Kaia Lehari has discussed the metaphors of 'city as a garden', 'city as a monument' and 'city as a machine' in her monograph *Space. Place. Environment* (Lehari 1997: 81). The city as a monument aims at representing hegemony and the power of the people governing it. The city as a machine in its ideal formation is completely subjected to rationale, being thus most clearly opposed to chaotic and irrational nature. The city as a garden conveys the ideal of bringing the Garden of Eden to Earth: it is a place for meditation and harmony, a static and self-sufficient entity. It is true that none of these metaphoric images could be used as *the* explanation of the nature of cities at a certain time and location. They may, however, serve as notions of the 'typical'. In the following, examining the position of natural elements within the urban context as represented in Tõnu Õnnepalu's novels, the reflections of several of the aforementioned metaphors become evident.

## Gardens

The opposition of urban and rural culture is one of the means of stressing the distinctive urban identity. Agriculture and direct contact with the soil are not part of the urban lifestyle, as a rule. Such practices are limited to areas outside the urban realm. If agriculture is accepted within the city limits, it is principally in the form of horticulture, and even in that case the borders between the 'cultural' and 'natural' realms are clearly marked: cloister gardens surrounded with high walls, private gardens in which entry is prohibited, parks furnished with park supervisors. There are gardens that could not exist without walls, as the environmental aesthetician Robert Harbison (2000: 5) writes. A garden is a location in the urban space with a special status; it may even be perceived as a nook of ex-urban space within the urban. If the city is limited, the garden in the city is doubly so.

Cities and gardens are connected not only metaphorically, but also as real entities in Önnepalu's texts. The same is true for cities and the wilderness, if 'wilderness' is understood with the stress on 'wild' – as an excess of weed and lack of an organising human touch.

An expressive description of the wild city can be found in Önnepalu's debut novel, *Border State* (where the term for the capital city of the state in translation is, significantly, 'town'): 'But when it's June, night may never arrive, and then, on streets empty of humans, only trees rustle beneath the sparkling sky. In that town trees grow tall and wild. No one ever trims them. Black-currant bushes thrive in neglected backyards right in the center of town, poisoning the white nights with their sweet scent.' (Önnepalu 2000: 7.) First, there is the human body dimension explicitly present in this passage: the trees have grown so tall that no one can reach the tree tops any more. Nature in this town is literally, as well as symbolically, beyond the reach and control of humans. The presence of the smell of black-currant blossoms is another irregular feature of the description. In the current automotive era, we are used to experiencing nature mainly as a sight, a collection of predominantly visual stimuli, although noise is also quite an important feature. If any smells were to be associated with the city environment, it would be that of gas, engines, burnt rubber, oil, and all sorts of technical materials. The smell of berry blossoms is something one would probably not expect in a city, the more so as it is described as intrusive, inescapable, poisonous – therefore threatening. It represents a nature that cleaves the lives of people who can do nothing but obey its wild force (the same phenomenon can be observed in the case of rivers in Önnepalu's prose).

The wildness and wilderness are thus present not only in the public urban space, but also in private gardens. Often Önnepalu depicts private gardens as neglected and disorderly, or as having soil so fertile that the owner of the garden can hardly tend and trim the place to make it look neat. Berry bushes in neglected backyards in the middle of the city refer to yet another aspect of Eastern (assumedly Estonian) city landscapes: a way of gardening for production, 'flower-pot' agriculture. In *Princess*, the protagonist's Grandmother's garden is a location concretely associated with dull physical work: making vegetable beds, watering and weeding the carrots, making wooden constructions to support the big (wild) bushes of peonies. It is a garden where apple trees are not grown because of their beautiful blossoms, but because of the jam the apples yield in autumn.

This is a typical peasant's way of thinking, which is also evident in the case of parks. Önnepalu often includes parks in his descriptions of old Western European cities. In *Border State*, the geographically minded reader would get the impression that the city of Paris consists almost solely of the metro, the river, and parks. As a theorist of humanistic geography, David Seamon (1981: 89) has pointed out that public places such as cafes, restaurants and parks are areas where existential outsiders find refuge in a strange city. The park, it must be stressed, is one of the few public spaces that can be enjoyed without spending much money, i.e. without having to buy the right to occupy the space for some time. Parisian parks have a long and noble history indeed, but in a passage in *Border State*, Önnepalu describes their meaning as being disturbed:

By the way, the linden trees in the Tuileries gardens are in bloom right now. Only the bees are still missing. Someone has even collected linden blossoms. A bench has been dragged under the tree, and there are footprints on it. The blossoms collected in a paper cone have been discarded in a nearby trash bin. Maybe this person simply had the urge to pick blossoms. It may have reminded him of something, of some other time, or of the story "The Collection of Linden Blossoms". (Önnepalu 2000: 58.)

Normally, the trees in parks are regarded as objects of visual pleasure, sometimes also olfactory pleasure, but in a cultural sense they are not to be used as a source of nutrition. At the same time, in order to realise at all with what intention the bench had been dragged to the tree, one must have an idea of what the linden blossoms are collected for, and one must have the personal physical experience of picking the blossoms too. The fact of using city nature (as well as gardens) for practical purposes may suggest a certain backwardness, or even poverty. In the 'cultural' urban environment, nature is reserved for pleasure only. As Berleant has observed, when nature is tamed in the form of a park or a garden within the city limits, it does not represent danger any more, but is elevated to provide city people especially sophisticated pleasures, thus contributing to *urban fun* (Berleant 2000: 32).

It must be admitted that both Grandmother and the protagonist Anna in *Princess* try to assign symbolic meanings to the garden, too, but as their notions are very different, they fail to understand each other. Anna associates her idea of the 'felicitious childhood' that she has developed on the basis of images in Soviet schoolbooks with the garden. For Grandmother, the garden reflects the quality of humans' relationship with the God: if there is drought and gardening is not

productive, 'she then alluded that the hidden cause was that people were so sinful that they had deviated from the right path' (Tode 1997: 69). It also implies that 'garden' is not so much a symbolic as a real, lived phenomenon for both of them – unlike Westerners, for whom a garden seems to be a sign of a certain treasured sanctity.

According to Relph, a number of Western urban gardens could be termed 'inauthentic place making'. This is a feature of mass culture where things are done/used because 'everybody does', and where the lifestyle and environment are provided ready-made. There is no personal contribution to the development of the place; it comes as a result, not as a process. 'In some developments the package is so complete that the houses come with appliances, carpets, sodded lawns, foundation plants, and rustic coach lamps to light the driveway.' (Relph 1976: 126.) Western gardens as depicted in Önnepalu's novels are symbols of a certain bourgeois condition, bought rather than made, their value being more symbolic than created through personal commitment.

Yi-Fu Tuan describes gardens as sacred places, where the primordial act of creation is repeated over and over, thus ritually superimposing a divine order on the formerly disorderly land. He regards the garden as an Edenic middle landscape between the profane wilderness and the sinful city. Harbison writes that the garden is 'a closed place set apart, protected, privileged, with different rules and styles of life inside and outside. Eden had gates and therefore suggested life outside, but it did not let you view it.' (Harbison 2000: 5–6.) Gardens are normally surrounded by fences that separate them from the surrounding profane space. The fence can be penetrated only in certain places and under certain conditions, therefore also functioning as a control mechanism, controlling passage both to the outside as well as to the inside. The only way to get out of Eden is to commit a sin.

The Edenic gardens depicted in *Princess* are set in Southern Germany, in a small town somewhere near Munich. The narcissuses blossom, lawns are mown, apple-trees and cherries are completely white, everything is in order and there is no place for wildness and random flowers: 'There is no one in the gardens of the villas. Green grass and narcissuses. A dog comes to the fence and looks at us. Makes no sound.' (Tode 1997: 18.) Behind this seemingly idyllic sight, a strict control mechanism is revealed. If the lawn is not mown, the neighbours will look – and this is a look of suspicion. This means that if people do not care about their

status symbols, they are deviant and thus potentially dangerous to the well-established society. The beautiful surface hides rigid structure: nature is confined to representing Paradise, and its owners are confined within their Garden on the same terms as Adam and Eve.

Wild(er)ness is not an exclusively 'eastern' quality, however. We find some gardens that have run wild even among the above-described bourgeois; they are imprisoning idylls. One of them belongs to an enigmatic old man who lives in an otherwise very orderly small Southern German town, his neglected garden creating a strong contrast with his neighbours' lots. The paths lead to unexpected views, they wind to create a labyrinth, at the end of which there is a small clearing. The garden is so unusual that the protagonist perceives wind touching the Aeolian harp as personified. The exceptionality of this fairy-tale-like garden is ignored by the other members of the town.

The same is true of Frau Schuler whose boarding house is the central locus in *Princess*. Her enterprise is half-illegal, and the overgrown garden surrounding her house adds to this impression. Her guests have obscurities in their past, they are criminals, mafia members, people who do not wish anyone to take too much interest in their stay. People like Frau Schuler, with her dilapidated house and garden left in oblivion, are positioned at the margins of respectable society, but they are still not outsiders, as would be people who possess no house or garden.

A disorderly natural environment in urban settings is even more explicitly related to the foreigners in *Princess*. There is a narrow patch of lawn left growing into scrub right by the window of the *Ausländeramt*, which the immigrants in the queue can see. This is supposed to remind them of their own homeland and 'evoke fear that they shall be sent back to the place where the lawns have not been mown for years and a young thicket is growing on the ruins' (Tode 1997: 99). Chaos in society is ironically associated with an unkempt landscape. Gardens with smooth green lawns are supposed to suggest a sense of security: they are under control; everything connected with them is under control.

A conclusion on the basis of the previous examples might be that idyllic bourgeois gardens are seemingly set in opposition to wild, untended gardens on the one hand, and to pragmatic gardens explicitly related to physical effort on the other hand. One important feature that unites gardens as such is what literary ecologist Joseph W. Meeker has expressed as human dominance over nature. He criticises the idea of a garden as a safe haven outside of time, pointing out

that this is rather a simplified model of civilisation, the maintenance of which requires great human effort. He writes, 'The pastoral epiphany is a recognition that neither human society nor wilderness is a suitable environment for people, and that the garden, trying to mediate between the two, merely separates us from other humans and from nature.' (Meeker 1997: 58.) Suburban gardens have been characterised using words as strong as 'hermaphrodite' (see Lehari 1997: 74): they are deprived of the truly rural, as well as of truly urban qualities, resulting in a good-for-nothing hybrid formation.

In Önnepalu's oeuvre, 'garden' works as a powerful multivalent metaphor. It is Eden as well as prison; the embodiment of a Soviet idea of happiness as well as the means to meet the nutritional needs of people. The idea of 'city as a garden' is present in his texts, but its content is not fixed.

## Rivers

Rivers have been natural objects of great importance in the history of human settlement from the earliest times. People have based cosmogonies on and associated various rituals with rivers in their immediate proximity (Tuan 1990: 85–91). One of the inevitable practical requirements of a dwelling is to have a place to get fresh water. Rivers serve as passageways and make transportation possible, both in summer and in winter. As they connect a settlement with other settlements down- and upstream, they also divide the people on the opposite banks. A city divided by a river is exposed to the seasonal forces of nature and therefore is vulnerable to the breaking up of ice or to floods demolishing bridges and coastal roads. As Kaia Lehari writes, the banks are actually created only when a bridge is built to connect them. A bridge actualises the stream and the movement of crossing (Lehari 2002: 53).

A river constitutes a border zone. It creates the dynamics of controlled and uncontrolled, limited and unlimited, enabling a number of ambivalent interpretations. In Önnepalu's texts, rivers appear as frequently as gardens, playing a significant role in virtually each of the described cities. At first glance, the dynamics seems to be clear here, too. Western rivers are burdened with cultural signification, whereas Eastern rivers represent the wilder, darker side of metaphorical understanding: the Seine and Tejo are impregnated with cultural meanings, whereas the river that flows through a smaller city, presumably Tartu, is depicted as very wild.

The Tejo is a river that has carried the ships of many seafarers, explorers and conquerors to the ocean, having once been an important historical agent. In *Price*, the Tejo is observed from a distance, as a panorama that evokes the protagonist's thoughts about the past, history and oblivion. His position viewing the river from the bastions of an old castle above the city contributes to the image of the past glorious days that have now lost their meaning. The river repeats the motif of the bygone grandeur that is connected with the old churches in the downtown, 'inside of which the old gold shines, once robbed by those who died long before now' (Önnepalu 1995: 137). The river contains the cultural memory of the local people and at the same time exposes it to various inquisitions.

If the Tejo is the river of the past in Önnepalu's vision, the Seine appears as a dynamic part of the contemporary City of Culture. It has been a part of the city of Paris for so long that its natural meaning has almost completely been replaced by a cultural one. The Seine is described almost like a piece of art, 'We were in bed and the sun was shining outside on the Seine. Reflections from the water were jumping around on the ceiling. [...] A ship passed on the river and threw the jumping light reflections into a total dither.' (Önnepalu 2000: 63.) It can be seen that the river is not only the carrier of cultural connotations, but is even capable of creating them. The Seine actively influences the city it pervades, but the influence is by no means aggressive. It may be somewhat mystical, but it definitely is positive and not threatening.

This is the most evident discrepancy in the characterisations of Western and Eastern rivers. The Emajõgi River – it is not given a proper name in the texts of *Border State* or *Princess*, but its prototype is evident on the basis of its geographical descriptions – is uncontrollable and therefore threatening. Unlike gardens, no human influence is, or can possibly be, exercised on this natural object. The river is beyond the reach of humans, like high tree tops that can not be trimmed.

The Emajõgi is first described in Önnepalu's novels as follows, 'I did indeed attend a university at one time, in a very small town by a river, behind the woods. [...] The bell in the town hall tower would strike the hour, and when people crossed the wooden bridge, it sounded ominously thundering. In the evenings I too crossed that bridge. I too wore a long grey overcoat with its collar raised and a student's cap pulled over my eyes, because there was always a biting wind blowing along that river.' (Önnepalu 2000: 55–56.) The people, aloof, hurrying, taciturn,

for whom the river is but an unpleasant element of their environment, an impediment, create an anxious atmosphere about the river. Of course, this description of the physical environment may be read as an equivalent to the dominant mental atmosphere of the time: the stagnation time before the fall of the communist regime, bleak and incredulous. Whereas the gardens of this region are associated with dull labour and the sense of being trapped at an individual level, the river seems to embody the desolation of the everyday public sphere.

Also the river in *Princess* is uncontrollable and wild events take place there:

When the night is cold, a lot of ducks will again freeze into the ice and the dogs have a feast. [---] Although they sometimes quack at nights, the ones that are at vigil and not sleeping, no one hears their voices or they are quacking too late. Even a fox is said to come along the river, from the woods, because right after the dumping grounds there is the forest. But dogs above all. (Tode 1997: 46.)

The river is presented as a totally wild zone outside culture, where the human order does not reach. It is what could be termed 'wilderness' in its literal sense. Also the hint of the weakness of the city limits is explicit in the above quoted passage: it is rather easy for wild animals to enter the city, coming along the ice covering the river. But besides the intrusion of wild animals, domesticated animals run wild and realise their instincts on the river without any hindrance from humans.

The river is an active agent here, but in a totally different manner than the Seine. It intrudes on people's lives, and quite literally: in spring when the river floods, it invades cellars and houses located along the meadows on the riverbanks. Humans can do nothing but put up with the situation. The river makes them literally experience the cycles of nature and be a part of them. Humans may express their desperation as the neighbour of the protagonist does in *Princess*, but this in no way influences the real power relations between the forces of nature, the river, and the representatives of human culture.

Within the city limits, humans make an effort to impose some cultural meanings on the river, but the thin cultural layer that they have attempted to attach to the river is washed away:

In spring, when the window is open, my typewriter's voice is different. It echoes back from the river. The flow of the river takes it along. And when it is evening, the smells of sewage and poplars and nettles and ashweed come from outside. And the vast smell of the river that it has gathered on its way, from the marshes and ditches and fir

forests and alder woods and mucky fields which cannot be covered even by the smell of the sewage. It remains there, veiled. (Tode 1997: 97.)

As the river is so thoroughly connected with the land and the landscape it crosses, the scattered marks of culture that the small university town tries to leave on the river are taken along, but they cannot alter the essence of the river: it is the passageway of the wild and of the natural.

What is common to the rivers of the East and West in Õnnepalu's construction is their function as message carriers and as dim areas of several transitions, physical and mental. The Tejo plays an important part in provoking the protagonist's thoughts about history, which later contribute to his experience of isolation from his own personal haunting thoughts. The Emajõgi River helps to explain the history and the identity of the protagonists. The Seine even appears as a mystical co-author of the text of the letters in the *Border State*: the protagonist confesses that he has found the text on a diskette in the Seine. It has been given to him at the edge of the city where the river widens, and close to the place where the metro crosses the river. This represents the border zone of urban civilisation where technology and nature meet and cross, but do not overlap. The moment of retaining distinct identities, the natural and the cultural, is what associates all the rivers depicted by Õnnepalu. Here, analogously to what has been concluded in connection with gardens, it has to be admitted that rivers appear as multivalent metaphors in Õnnepalu's texts, but under the surface of the opposite connotations there are certain qualities that are common to all natural objects of the same type. Figuratively speaking, it might be concluded that a river as a flowing natural object also results in flowing metaphors.

## Conclusion

The aim of the present article was to explicate the layer of natural imagery in the prose oeuvre of the contemporary Estonian author Tõnu Õnnepalu. Nature in an urban context creates a number of potential tensions with its somewhat oxymoronic position: it is an island within a man-made landscape, without a culturally conditioned basis. The perception of nature, however, is culturally conditioned. The traces of Õnnepalu's peculiar cultural knowledge can be seen, for example, in the passages concerning various pragmatic usages of nature.

As this brief examination of urban nature in Tõnu Õnnepalu's novels shows, it is difficult to avoid ambiguous interpretations of its components. Through scarce means, the author evokes images of gardens, parks and rivers in different places, both East and West. The traditional opposition of these two polarities of the stereotypical mental map do not however work at the deeper levels of Õnnepalu's texts. The seemingly idyllic, neat gardens are ironically shown to stand for the various control mechanisms present in a welfare state. Gardens that are cultivated with, first and foremost, pragmatic purposes in mind may have several symbolic meanings that appear to be incompatible. Neglected gardens contain a certain degree of independence, the price of which is marginalisation. Rivers are natural objects that cannot be ignored. They may participate in history and culture, but they may also remain wild and incalculable. The author seems to suggest that it is always worthwhile to consider the potential power of rivers. This may be stretched to apply to urban nature in all of its manifestations: it is a phenomenon to be further studied and explored.

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