

Naturalcultural Hybridity and Becoming: Andrus Kivirähk's *The Man Who Spoke Snakish* in a Material Ecocritical Perspective

Maris Sõrmus
Tallinn University

Abstract



The article takes a material ecocritical view on contemporary Estonian literature—Andrus Kivirähk's *The Man Who Spoke Snakish*. The canonical novel, which focuses on the forest life being replaced with village life as well as the extinction of snakish, or, snake language, has importantly been classified as “the first Estonian eco-novel” (Hasselblatt 1262). In this light, I discuss the ways that nature emerges in new materialist terms as a subject, tangled with culture, challenging normative understandings of humanity. Particularly interesting is the fluid border of nature and culture, which suggests their reciprocal becoming. First, naturalcultural hybridity becomes manifest in the blurring of voices. Snakes emerge as the ancient brothers of humans, speaking with the last forest dwellers, while the protagonist speaks snakish and resembles a snake. The hybridity is further represented through the grandfather, human apes, and the protagonist's sister. Above all, a hybrid “natureculture” is portrayed through Meeme, who resembles human “turf” and dissolves in nature, foregrounding the trans-corporeal naturalcultural entanglement. As Meeme becomes the earth, the novel suggests the intra-active becoming of the natural and the cultural, confirming the new materialist idea that there is no solid ground on which to stand but a dynamic world, where nature and culture finally still retreat into their own worlds.

Keywords: Andrus Kivirähk, material ecocriticism, natureculture, trans-corporeality, new materialism

Resumen

Este artículo analiza la obra *The Man Who Spoke Snakish* de Andrus Kivirähk, escritor estonio contemporáneo, desde una perspectiva ecocrítica materialista. Esta novela de culto, que se centra en la desaparición de la vida en el bosque y en la extinción del idioma de las serpientes, ha sido llamada “la primera econovela estonia” (Hasselblatt 1262). Teniendo esto en cuenta, observo cómo aparece la naturaleza como un sujeto entrelazado con la cultura, desafiando de esta manera el concepto normativo de ser humano. Es particularmente interesante el borroso límite entre naturaleza y cultura, haciendo hincapié en su transformación recíproca. En primer lugar, se manifiesta el hibridismo naturocultural en la mezcla de las voces. Las serpientes, hermanos de los humanos, hablan con los últimos habitantes del bosque, mientras que el protagonista habla el idioma de las serpientes y se parece a una serpiente. El mismo hibridismo es también evidente en la figura del abuelo, los simios y la hermana del protagonista. No obstante, la máxima declaración del hibridismo naturocultural es Meeme, que se parece a un pasto humano disolviéndose en la naturaleza y destacando el entrelazamiento transc corporal y naturocultural. Así como Meeme se convierte en tierra, la novela enfatiza la interacción del bosque y el pueblo reflejando una nueva comprensión materialista según la cual la naturaleza y la cultura se funden para formar un solo concepto.

Palabras clave: Andrus Kivirähk, ecocrítica materialista, naturocultura, transc corporalidad, nuevo materialismo

In Estonian culture, Andrus Kivirähk (b. 1970) is one of the most prominent and innovative writers, whose works are known for their humour and satire. A journalist by profession, Kivirähk writes regularly for the Estonian daily *Eesti Päevaleht*. In his prolific career, Kivirähk has written novels, short stories, children's books, and plays; his most popular works include *The Memoirs of Ivan Orav* (2001), *The Old Barny* (2000), and *The Man Who Spoke Snakish* (2007). His novels have been translated into a variety of languages, including the French in 2013. This translation, *L'homme qui savait la langue des serpents*, has been recently recognised with the fantasy fiction prize Le Grand Prix de l'Imaginaire in the category of the best foreign novel. Kivirähk's literature for children has been particularly acclaimed, gaining an award for the best Estonian children's author, among other forms of recognition (e.g. award of the best Estonian playwright, Stalker Award for Science Fiction and Friedebert Tuglas Short Story Award).

The use of parody, pastiche and the grotesque characterises Kivirähk's oeuvre, and being also termed a postmodernist, he tends to subvert conventional attitudes about nation and what is regarded as own or alien. Focusing on national concerns and history, Kivirähk often unites historical and political themes with mythological elements. These traits are evident in *The Man Who Spoke Snakish* (2007), which is set in medieval Estonia and portrays the lives of forest dwellers, who, through the invasion of new trends, are caused to leave for villages. The protagonist is the last man who speaks "snakish," or snake language, and still lives in the forest. The peculiarity lies in the characters' leaving their homes and adopting Christianity, thus merging into the new world. Between these worlds of nature and culture, the protagonist's search for his place in the world begins, mixed with love, disappointment, and the legend of the giant snake Northern Frog, the huge reptile that is the guardian of forest Estonians but that is left to sleep. Snakish is a language which can be understood by most creatures and organic life, including the forest itself.

The Man Who Spoke Snakish has become a canonical book in Estonia, having led to 2007 being labelled as "the year of 'snake words'" (Contra 119). This motif, however, has been borrowed from the collection of fairy tales by Jüri Parijõgi (1977)—*A Tale About a Man Who Spoke Snakish*, focussing on a protagonist who is able to communicate with animals and birds and who understands snake language as well. The urge to write the novel is fused with the dangers of the Estonian language and nation becoming extinct. Indeed, Kivirähk has classified his work as a novel of warning or prediction, and in that vein most analyses have focused on snake language as a symbol of the disappearing Estonian language and the theme of threatened national identity. However, while the novel is predominantly classified as magical realism, fantasy, or science fiction, it is noteworthy that it has been termed "the first Estonian eco-novel" (Hasselblatt 1262).¹ Hasselblatt discusses how, although the "green" perspective is not central in

¹ Considering the ecological and magical realist strand of the novel, both frameworks would assist in a fruitful engagement with the text, and even more so, as they may be characterised by several common traits. Namely, both the ecocritical and magical realist framework are able to look beyond the dominant

Estonian literature and the focus seems to lie on everlasting topics, a powerful green movement has arisen in Estonia with this popular work.

Despite this claim and the strong presence of ecocritical concerns, the novel has not been viewed from that angle, except for my own introductions of an ecocritical perspective.² In this article, I propose a new-materialist reading of the novel and will explore the way in which nature emerges as an active subject, and with a subjectivity that is tangled with culture. Drawing on material ecocriticism and new materialism, I am particularly interested in the fluid border of nature and culture, which challenges the normative understandings of humanity, and suggests the importance of the reciprocal becoming of humans and nonhumans.

Before proceeding further, it will be useful to provide a short overview of material ecocriticism, with further concerns discussed directly through literary analysis. Material ecocriticism is situated in the new materialist paradigm, which introduces a non-dualist understanding of nature and culture, or, matter and discourse, and allows for a more expansive view of agency. The non-dualist conception is manifested through various entanglements of the human and the nonhuman, be it bacteria and viruses inhabiting the human body, the effects of pollution, and the movement of toxins or food, to provide only some examples. Matter—ecological relations and physical forces—and discourse—cultural representations—are the key constituents in this approach, highlighting a practice where they emerge through one another, through their interactions. Such a view holds also the promise of entailing “a truly non-anthropocentric vision,” as Serpil Oppermann specifies (56).

The anti-hegemonic approach of new materialism extends the notion of agency, which is usually considered to be a human attribute. Centrally important is the idea that matter possesses agency; that is, it acts out and causes changes. These nonhuman-initiated changes are perceivable both inside the body and outside, as in the example of environmental catastrophes, which visibly influence human lives. Matter should be approached therefore as “a field of distributed agency”, recognising that “humans share this horizon with countless other actors, whose agency [...] forms the fabric of events and causal chains”, as Serenella Iovino clarifies (Iovino and Oppermann, “Theorizing”

Western value and belief systems, such as anthropocentrism, proposing an alternative conception of reality (ecocriticism, by viewing not human relationships but the relation between humans and nonhuman beings, and, what is more, the agentic capacity of the nonhuman, as is characteristic to material ecocriticism; magical realism, by making the real magical and extraordinary). As magical realism has been defined as a genre “decentering privileged centers” (D’haen 191), both this genre and ecocriticism offer thus a different way of seeing reality and form thereby a site of resistance to normative understandings of the world, allowing, for example, for a view of nature as agentic and speaking (which would be otherwise deemed a magical power, in the vein of anthropocentrism). Doing so, both theoretical frameworks blur rigid binaries and convey an alternative imaginary to a normative worldview. On the one hand, magical realism is understood as “a mode suited to exploring—and transgressing—boundaries” (Zamora and Faris 5), blurring the line between real and imaginary, self and other, and other dualities, while, material ecocriticism, on the other hand, also suggests a non-dualistic understanding of nature and culture. In this common boundary-transgressing vein, magical realism with its subversiveness might certainly help to initiate a material ecocritical engagement with Kivirähk’s novel, which stretches the nature-culture binary, making nature magically articulate and dissolving the line between the human and the nonhuman.

² See Sõrmus “Ecocritical” or Sõrmus “The Human”.

451). Material ecocriticism highlights instead a multitude of actors and their interaction with humans. “We dwell in a world crisscrossed by nonhuman agencies, which combine and collide with the agentic field of our species,” as Oppermann notes (“Material” 64). The recognition of this other-than-human agency is important, because regarding nature passive and inert facilitates the exploitive use of nature. The basis for a material ecocritical view is thus, on the one hand, the connection of matter and agency and, on the other, interactions of bodies and meanings. Stacy Alaimo has pertinently captured the place of nature in the new materialist outlook: it is not a blank silent resource but “an active, signifying force; an agent in its own terms; a realm of multiple, inter- and intra-active cultures” (Alaimo and Hekman 12). Culture, on the other hand, is not undermined either, but taken into account in shaping the world. Such an anti-normative approach recognises therefore “the kinship between out-side and in-side, the mind and the world, embracing life, language, mind and sensorial perception in a non-dualistic perspective” (Iovino and Oppermann, “Material” 79), allowing us to rethink the material and the discursive without privileging either.

Another term to capture the naturalcultural relations is “intra-action”, as proposed by Karen Barad (815). As such relations are analysed towards the end of the article, the term needs clarification. Contrary to interaction, which presumes the prior existence of independent entities, Barad emphasises the importance of “intra-action” (815), in which nature and culture are formed—by evolving reciprocally. Rather than being, they result from a process of becoming, “in the ongoing ebb and flow of agency” (817). Such an ebb and flow of naturalcultural agencies suggests the hybrid becoming of the human and the nonhuman, so that one or the other cannot be supposed to be the subject or the object *per se*. Rather, they are mutually entailed in a dynamic process of relations, so that “boundaries do not sit still” (Barad 817). Similarly, matter is not a fixed substance but a “substance in its intra-active becoming—not a thing, but a doing, a congealing of agency” (822). In other words, what is nature and what is culture becomes manifest in their material-discursive co-extensiveness, continuously evolving, transforming, and influencing each other. It is these naturalcultural manifestations that I will now explore in *The Man Who Spoke Snakish*, discussing the blurring of voices, other instances of hybridity, and, thereafter, the literal merging of nature and culture, highlighting their trans-corporeal entanglement. Finally, the naturalcultural “intra-activism” in shaping each other is analysed.

The Man Who Spoke Snakish focuses on the protagonist Leemet, the last man to speak snakish, who lives in the forest. The majority of forest dwellers have become villagers, discarding their former lives as animalistic and pagan. These events on the human level are conveyed by parallel events with the nonhuman world. One instance of this is the image of Leemet and the village elder represented as two snails who do not manage to glance into each others’ shells. Whereas one of the shells is marked by snake language and the Northern Frog, the other shell includes only God and the Roman pope (Kivirähk 170).

However, nature and culture do not remain juxtaposed as such, but are manifested in various forms of blurring, dissolving their rigid separation. This hybridity becomes strongly manifest in the characters of snakes and humans, and, particularly, in the blurring of their voices. Kivirähk challenges the idea of the evil Biblical snake, making snakes the brothers of humans. They have a shared ancestry and speak a common language: snakish. That is, snakes emerge as voiced subjects, speaking with the last few forest dwellers, some of whom in turn speak snakish. This hybridisation originates from snakes, because they have taught the language to humans—snakes therefore possess various degrees of agency, speaking out and teaching humans. They are sentient beings and effective actors, whose active power to direct humans is indicative of the creativity and expressivity of nature. In the snakes' ability to teach the language to their (otherwise) superior species, snakes illustrate their own specific power to weave narratives even, highlighting the central concept of narrative agency in material ecocriticism (see, in particular, Oppermann on "storied matter" and matter's narrative dimension). Doing so and emerging as active (articulate and sentient) agents, snakes, indeed, intermingle with the humans as "a subject in itself," performing uncannily beyond human control, to echo nature's agentic power as formulated by Iovino and Oppermann ("Theorizing" 461). However, in spite of the language having been taught to humans, with the appearance of the tempting village life, snakish is spoken by few people and used for other purposes. The protagonist's friend, snake Ints, for example, remarks that in the past his father had a lot to talk with humans about forest life, but now the humans only kill goats with the snake words (Kivirähk 34). When a man in a faraway island hears Leemet speak in snakish, he is glad that there are still "educated people" (225), while the majority's ears seem to be dumb to the ancient language.³

Thus, on the one hand, snakes are articulate, but on the other, it is even more significant that the last few forest dwellers speak the language of nature. The very manifestation of this is the protagonist of the title. Leemet is taught the language by his uncle Vootele, while the majority has been alienated from snakish, considering the process of learning it too difficult. As Kivirähk explains: "Snake words are not easy. The human ear is scarcely able to distinguish between all nuanced differences, which separate one hiss from the other, giving a new meaning to the utterance" (28). The human tongue is not as flexible as the snake's either, requiring continuous training. The forest dwellers who still understand the language can only differentiate between the most common hisses. The most powerful words, however, which would awake the Northern Frog, who has defeated all enemies in ancient times, require that snakish should be spoken by ten thousand people altogether—yet, there is only the last man speaking snakish.

Through training, Leemet nevertheless becomes fluent in the language, experiencing the performative effect—the agency—of snake words on their surroundings. For example, eagles can be called to fly down to earth, and animals are

³ All translations from the novel are the author's.

calmed, or provided with different commands. And, above all, Leemet learns that “now I can also talk with the forest” (33). In fact, Vootele promises to teach Leemet so well that he no longer understands whether he is a human or a snake (29). In addition to his command of snakish, Leemet does, indeed, become a manifestation of such a blurring of the human and the nonhuman, crawling on the grass or wanting to dig under the earth like a mole in order to hide. This wish to disappear into the soil evokes a trans-corporeal meeting zone of human corporeality and nature (see Alaimo), where human flesh would mingle with that of the soil, conveying a rhizomatic mesh of the natural and the cultural.⁴ Leemet is further said to resemble a snake even in terms of his appearance: while Leemet’s best friend Pärtel grows tall, Leemet “resembles a snake with joints, being lanky and thin” (109).

Furthermore, Leemet develops a life-long friendship with one of the snakes, Ints. Saving Ints’s life from a hedgehog, he gets invited by Ints to the snake cave, where no other human has ever set foot. Although Leemet feels anxious about the visit, he thinks that “snakes are still our own kind” (35). And he is right—the naturalcultural hybridity becomes particularly evident in the appreciation of Leemet’s deed by the snake kings, who call Leemet their own son. “A human who lives in the forest and understands our language is our brother”; humans who have left for the village are politely greeted, but if they do not respond, they are ‘not like us,’ the snake king clarifies (36). Being invited to hibernate in the cave, Leemet considers himself to be more as snake than human (127). Thus, this close relationship illustrates a non-binary view of nature and culture, a hybrid co-existence.

However, when Leemet congratulates Ints on her new-born offspring, mistaking Ints for a male snake, an inevitable difference between nature and culture is observable. As the narrator clarifies:

Snakes did not fully understand people, although they spoke the same language. They regarded people as their younger brothers, whose older brother had taught the secret language and who now discarded the precious gift and become voluntarily like hedgehogs or insects [...]. Snakes did not need people; they were sure they could also live without them” (122).

Snakes are proud animals and consider other beings who cannot speak snakish inferior. There is thus a further hybridity of voices, as snake language functions as a basis for hierarchy inside nature. Snakes, for example, see hedgehogs as “stupid blockheads” (35). Furthermore, humans are defamiliarised: snakes consider the iron men with their armour the relatives of hedgehogs—in the same way that humans already feed the iron men, they will probably start feeding hedgehogs with milk, too (35). Insects, however, are at the bottom of the hierarchy of speaking agents. That is, mosquitoes, bees, and horseflies cannot speak snakish, for their brain is as little as a speck of dust (32). Contrary to the superior snake language, “crab lice didn’t understand the least of the ancient language; they had only their nasty whine” (33). Grasshoppers, spiders, and ladybirds are even termed “born idiots” (58). Moreover, snakes regard humans who no

⁴ On trans-corporeality, see especially Alaimo, *Bodily Natures*, where this idea is discussed in length.

longer know snakish parallel to the stupid insects: "Let them [people] be many, let them live in a cluster, on top of each other. Ants live this way too, but they are mere rubbish," as Ints remarks (126).

In such a rich portrayal of nature and culture, Kivirähk therefore enmeshes snake language within the matrix of a hybridity of voices. Although humans and snakes have a shared ancestry, humans no longer value the ancient language, and are thus seen by snakes as mere insects. Yet, the protagonist becomes the very manifestation of a hybrid of nature and culture, speaking snakish so well that he could be mistaken for a snake. In the light of the blurred voices, Leemet could be characterised as "natured culture," while the snakes in turn as "cultured nature" (Murphy 89), being able to speak and doing so with humans. In particular, snakes emerge as speaking and acting agents, intermingling with the forest dwellers as creative subjects of their own.

Proceeding from this, there are further instances of naturalcultural hybridity, where culture appears "natured," blurring the neat division. One of such instances is Leemet's grandfather, who has poisonous teeth like an adder. Although Leemet and his uncle know snakish, they have not inherited this characteristic. In ancient times, all the forefathers had poisonous teeth, but just as snakish started to be forgotten, so these teeth disappeared. However, the fact that Leemet's grandfather has them further confirms the shared ancestry of snakes and Leemet's family. The grandfather is, indeed, like a snake, crawling in his island grass legless, and biting the enemy (Kivirähk 212). His face is hairy, reminiscent of a shrub, and his hands are extremely bony like an eagle's claws (211); he also lives like a snake in a small den made of wood and stones and carved with many passages. Hiding in the soil and the natural dwelling, this naturalcultural figure represents with his characteristics an entangled, trans-corporeal territory of "human" body and nature, where "the human is always intermeshed with the more-than-human world" (Alaimo, "Trans-Corporeal" 238). Moreover, the division of nature and culture is finally blurred when the grandfather finishes the wings made of the bones of killed humans—in order to wage a final war on the new world. With the wings and the added knots filled with wind, the grandfather finally becomes almost a bird, determined to have his revenge against the people who have discarded the forest and the ancient way of life. He reminds Leemet of "a kind of a small mythical Northern Frog, whose tremendous vigour spouted sparks and scorched the enemies into ashes [...] still waging a war and stiff like a branch of a tree, which straightens itself after being bent and lashes your face" (Kivirähk 212). Being not just compared to forest creatures, but uniting in his figure a human and an adder, the grandfather illustrates the trans-corporeal melting together of human flesh and the nonhuman, so that in his person they are inseparable. Resembling and behaving like a snake, "he" is no longer a human but rather a hybridised human animal. Such a view where the natural and the cultural merge radically challenges the normative understandings of humanity.

This non-dualist view is also evident in the human apes, where nature and culture mingle. Having human names and living like the last, more ancient forest dwellers, the human apes initially resemble humans, rather than nonhumans. They

move side by side on two legs and delve deep into the ancient world, are naked and eat finally only raw meat. Furthermore, they discard their cave as too modern, living their life on top of a tree as the only solid ground: "They wanted to go as far back to the past as possible, for they believed that only the ancestors knew the truth and all the subsequent development was only an uninhibited falling into a swamp [...] secure ground was a branch of tree under the naked bottom" (154). Thus, preferring a more animal-like lifestyle, the human apes finally retreat from their last human traits and humanity. This process of finally becoming an animal also becomes manifest in the fact that the apes breed lice—of all insects they can only communicate with lice, because they have dwelled long enough in animal fur and have thus learned something (59). These insects also understand the ancient snake words, which the apes pronounce in a particularly old way. Even their songs, which "consist more of sounds than words, with their shrieks, snarls and muttering" (113), vividly suggest the hybridisation of nature and culture.

Another instance of the fluidity is the prevalent mutual interest of bears and humans. Kivirähk radically overcomes the distance between humans and these animals and therein the fear of bears. Instead, bears long for women and many of the latter also sigh at how cute bears are (60). Although the majority of humans disapproves of such a relationship, snakes consider "humans and bears relatively similar creatures and do not see any reason why they could not develop a relationship" (90). Leemet also feels much closer to bears than he does to certain village people. Namely, his mother has been married to a villager, later develops a relationship with a bear. Moreover, the very instance of such a hybridity is Leemet's sister Salme, who falls in love with a bear and "wants to become his lawful wife" (143); after all, with the emptying of the forest there is no one else to marry. Eventually, Salme retreats to the bear's den, stretching the normative border of what it is to be a human. First, the bear emerges as a subject who is loved, but what is more, Salme herself finally resembles a bear. Living with a bear, she eats raw meat and her hair and overall appearance are dishevelled. When the bear gets extremely fat and no longer remembers snakish, he and Salme start communicating only by muttering. To Leemet, his sister reminds him of a stinking, rotten rabbit thigh: "Her time was over; she was no longer a human. She was neither a bear, but moved toward this direction", as Leemet concludes (366). This state of in-betweenness blurs the nature-culture line in a fascinating manner, suggesting that interactions across species boundaries are possible. Whereas Salme is becoming animal, the bear becomes even more animalised, becoming extremely fat—this corporeal substance is highly agentic, taking over the animal and imprisoning it to the cave. Though the human and the animal are becoming both animalised, bears in this novel generally are humanised, being polite and trying to attract girls with a wreath on their head. A particularly vivid instance of the humanization of bears is the dancing bears, who have been taught dancing and civilised manners and who are kept in a castle. When Leemet urges the bears to kill the people in the castle, the bears explain that killing is outdated nowadays, occurring only in "the dark forest" (349). Thus, while these bears are moving closer to humanity, Salme, in

turn, becomes an animal, experiencing the trans-corporeal entanglement with her beloved.

The most spectacular instance of hybridity is, however, Meeme, one of the last forest dwellers. He is always seen close to the ground, like a leaf of a tree. Leemet also ponders over this mysterious character: "What kind of person is Meeme, in fact? As said, I had seen him only lying somewhere and drinking wine excessively; earlier, eating swamps. He looked somehow snotty, covered with resin and mud, eyes hazy, and eyebrows full of dandruff. His appearance was not trustworthy" (48). Although Meeme's hybridity is shaky—captured through the haziness—, his past is known to the other forest dwellers. He has been a courageous warrior, who disapproves of the idea of going into war with modern weapons. Instead, Meeme's success lies in killing the enemy with the ancient snake words, which make animals mad, so that they attack the iron men. Although Meeme manages to clear the forest from the foreigners, he understands the uselessness of this endeavour—people themselves hustle to the village, self-colonising themselves. Thus, Meeme no longer cares, appreciating only the villagers' wine. As he clarifies this pleasure: "you no longer understand whether you are alive or dead. Just lie like a corpse" (107).

This is what Meeme represents: he is no longer a clearly demarcated human but not fully "natural" either. Instead, he represents a "fluid natureculture", to use the term of Donna Haraway (2). His character is a particularly vibrant example of such a blurring:

Meeme became more and more like turf. His clothes were covered with moss, and his beard, which covers his entire face, holds dead insects, falling leaves, and all sorts of decomposed matter. Inset in this rubbish plunge two eyes, the eyelashes of which are intermeshed with a spider net, and a mouth with red thick lips. Every now and then Meeme raises a wine bottle to this mouth. It was totally unknown how he could still collect the drink—according to his appearance it could be thought that roots grow out of his bottom, keeping him in the soil. (153)

The unique portrayal of the human intermeshed with the nonhuman turf, moss, and creatures is truly indicative of the new materialist co-existence of the natural and the cultural. They emerge, indeed, through one another—Leemet becomes a naturalcultural being in his contact with the soil and the moss, in turn, finds a body on which it spreads. Hereby, the moss, leaves, and other material things, the "decomposed matter" are highly agentic, taking control over the allegedly "human" body. The metaphor of roots is particularly vivid, capturing the naturalcultural entanglement of Meeme and the material world, whereas nature is agentic, planting him in the soil. With his hazy natural features, Meeme is pertinently termed "human turf" (153), radically re-configuring the allegedly stable nature-culture binary. Thus, Meeme is the very illustration of the previously explained new materialist kinship between the inside and the outside, which embraces the two in a non-dualistic perspective, as Lovino and Oppermann suggest.

The extraordinary portrayal of Meeme highlights a co-evolving "natureculture", in which "nature and culture implode into each other", as Haraway explains the fusion (138). Meeme, for instance, affirms that he does not resemble the decomposed matter of leaves, but he has become this— "Yes, I decay," he remarks (Kivirähk 194). In fact, he

wants to rot in the same place where he dies, to become one with his native soil. And, indeed, Meeme does finally dissolve into the earth, so that there is not the slightest division between the human body and nature. They merge, highlighting a trans-corporeal space. As Stacy Alaimo clarifies her fruitful notion, trans-corporeality is “a time-space where human corporeality, in all its material fleshiness, is inseparable from ‘nature’ or ‘environment’” (“Trans-corporeal” 238). That is, they “meet and mingle” (“Trans-corporeal” 238), so that the human subject is “substantially and perpetually interconnected with the flows of substances and the agencies of environments” (Alaimo, “States” 476). The inseparable mingling is evident in the final scene, where Meeme is in the process of becoming the earth:

There was Meeme, but it was certainly an exaggeration to consider him a human. He had lost even his last boundary features and when I [Leemet] stepped closer to him, I couldn't tell precisely where his body ended and the moss began. The forest was dark, too, but Meeme looked, indeed, like he had somehow dissolved in nature. He was like a melted heap of snow that had spread itself. The same moss which grew below and beside him also grew on him. Furthermore, it seemed that he had not moved for a long time, because he was covered with a thick layer of autumnal leaves. His face was dark like soil and his eyes gleamed from this layer like dew drops. (Kivirähk 374)

The compelling border-defying image of the naturalcultural being is one of an individual who has, indeed, mingled his flesh substantially with the flesh of the earth—moss and soil. Furthermore, this earth is agentic in taking control of him, spreading, and finally dissolving the creature in itself. The vaguely discernible human has become ultimately “intermeshed with the more-than-human world” (Alaimo, *Bodily 2*), melting the human and other-than-human corporealities. It is no longer possible to distinguish between Meeme's body and the agentic moss, and this compelling naturalcultural mesh is memorably conveyed through the portrayal of the human as a melted heap of snow that is again agentic, spreading and revoking any human features of Meeme. The inseparability of Meeme's body from nature fleshes out a situation where nature “is always as close as one's own skin” (Alaimo, “Trans-corporeal” 238), covering him on all sides, so that Meeme gradually becomes the “thick layer of autumnal leaves” and the dark soil, which he increasingly resembles. Meeme remarks to Leemet that he already senses how plants start growing through him; in spring, they will grow through him as if through turf, eaten by goats (Kivirähk 375). When Leemet passes through the place for the last time, Meeme's face has already decayed and “there was nothing of his body but a doughy substance, a puddle among turf, over which you would jump if you didn't want to get wet” (377).

Meeme, therefore, is the ultimate illustration of the trans-corporeal space, where his corporeality is inseparable from nature and its agentic forces. The latter provoke an “intra-action” of the natural and the cultural, in which Meeme experiences the process of gradually becoming the earth—becoming a leaf-like being on the very ground itself. The general intra-action between nature and culture, as represented by the forest and the village, will be now finally discussed, suggesting their reciprocal becoming. Most evidently, villagers have a transformative effect on the forest, leading to the extinction of this ancient life.

This in turn is rooted in the denial of the snake language. Namely, the new villagers adopt Christian beliefs taking snakes as pagan creatures as in the Biblical image. While the village elder Johannes exclaims, "Snakes cannot be the friends of humans," (Kivirähk 98), Leemet cannot imagine humans harming snakes, which is "as pointless as discussing whether an oak could attack a birch" (99). Moreover, the villagers deny the existence of snakish, the sound of which they have at least heard, having lived in the forest. As they explain: "There are no such words! Only the devil understands them!" (163). The denial lies strongly in the villagers' anthropocentric world-view and the newly found belief in God:

God does not want us to speak with snakes, because snakes are His enemy—and what do we have to talk with God's enemy about? In no country does anyone speak with snakes; believe me, I [Johannes] have seen the world and know what I am speaking about. Why do we have to be the last weak ones who hold on to communication with snakes? What do these poor serpents have to tell us? (167)

The villagers are so deeply entrenched in the beliefs of the new world that they deny the existence of the natural language, even in a contradictory manner—snakish is not supposed to exist, but they still raise questions as to why they would talk to God's enemy. Moreover, they move beyond the discourse of the enemy to that of the almighty nature of God:

Yes, they do not exist, he repeated. How else could it be that church knows nothing about them? [...] The Pope is almighty; every word which he says is the truth, and with the help of God he could even make rivers flow backwards. If snake words did exist, the Pope and the other holy men would also understand them, but they do not exist, because God has not *given* snakes the ability to speak. They do not have to be spoken with, but killed, that is, frightened off with prayer. (169; my emphasis)

For the villagers, thus, snakish has become a meaningless hiss—snakes do not speak according to their new worldview. In their belief, this ability can be granted only by the almighty. Communication with snakes is deemed outdated and pagan, which would make the villagers "the last weak ones," speaking with "these poor serpents" who are supposed to have nothing to say. Leemet's best friend Pärtel—now Peetrus—also "forgets" snakish, denying it because everyone does so: "What can I do with the snake words, I am no snake! I am a human, I live in a human village and speak human language" (186). Snakish is not a language for him: "Who cares what some animals do in your stupid forest? I speak what is happening in the world. You [Leemet] don't know anything about this; you don't know any languages!" The stark denial of snakish appears to function as an excuse for the villagers to distance themselves from the forest in every possible way, to become "modern." Thus, the last forest dwellers are in their view animalistic and "obviously stupid," talking with animals (125).⁵ In particular, this negation appears to suggest that the intra-active becoming of the forest is revoked by the becoming of the village, with the forest dwellers moving to the village.

⁵ For other texts that deal with talking animals, see, e.g., G. Orwell's *Animal Farm*, C. S. Lewis' *Chronicles of Narnia*, K. Grahame's *The Wind in the Willows*, M. Sandwall-Bergström's *Kulla-Gulla*. In this context, the emergence of Human Animal Studies shall be noted, the advocates of whom propose an alternative understanding of animals as agents. On animals as speaking agents see, for instance, Weil or McHugh.

As a result of the migration, the forest becomes increasingly empty, inhabited only by animals and the last people faithful to this life. Leemet is scared and dismayed, feeling as if the forest is decaying under his own eyes (118). The broken and dried tree branches become a symbol of this decay; in fact, the forest itself undergoes a process of change. As Leemet observes:

The forest has changed. Even the trees are not the same or I just don't recognise them; they have become alien. I don't mean that their trunks have become thicker, crowns wider and surging higher—all this is natural. There is also something else besides natural growth—the forest has become sloppy. It grows how it likes, stretches also where it has not been and lies about. The forest is messy and tangled. It is no longer a home, but a thing in itself, living its own life and breathing in its own rhythm. [...] Humans themselves have freed the place and just as they freed their wolves, so did they free the forest, so that it fell apart like a heap of decomposed matter. (141)

When humans have freed the place, nature's agentic presence becomes even more manifest—the forest spreads and, becoming "a thing in itself," assumes the final power. In particular, "living its own life and breathing in its own rhythm," nature is not passive or inert matter but vibrantly alive, even sensual and expressive. Moreover, in visibly changing—stretching, becoming sloppy, messy, and tangled—the forest is highly agentic and undergoes a process of becoming a superior presence. Indeed, as Serenella Iovino has expressed matter's agential potential, "the true dimension of matter is not that of a static being, but of a generative becoming" (53), which is the very process of active changes occurring in the forest.

Nature's agency in effecting a change is also perceivable in the snakes, who speak out, teach the forest dwellers snakish, and who bite the villagers in several instances. The giant reptile Northern Frog has once been such an agentic force too, eating all the forest dwellers' enemies and shrouding with its huge figure both the sun and the moon (Kivirähk 9). Besides the forest and its creatures, material things, such as moss, turf, and soil, also exhibit agentic actions, as is evident with Meeme's body tangling with the agentic materiality, which assumes control over his body and dissolves him in the soil (see 9). The moss and turf agentially decompose him in the earth, emitting a respective stink. "I have rot away," Meeme comments on the result of the action, specifying that if wine would be poured into his soil-covered mouth, it would soak in the soil like rain, because he has no back (375). This dissolving and rotting away confirms the trans-corporeal ethic according to which "the very stuff of ourselves is always [...] the stuff of an agential, tangled world" (Alaimo, "States" 489). Thus, whereas Meeme's decaying in the ground suggests the mingling of human and nonhuman flesh, Meeme points out to Leemet that he will also become decomposed. Emphasising that the decay and rot already lie within their body (Kivirähk 195), the materiality of human body is evoked. In other words, the body is not singularly cultural, but an entangled territory of the cultural and the natural. In the vein of Stacy Alaimo, "the ethical space of trans-corporeality is never an elsewhere but always already here, in whatever compromised, ever-catalyzing form" ("Trans-Corporeal" 260). The humans are thus always already naturalcultural, whereas nature forms an agentic force, effecting a change or assuming control—be it represented through the forest, snakes or material things in nature.

Furthermore, the agentic potential becomes also manifest through the snake words themselves. To provide just some examples of this transformative power, Leemet's grandfather, thrown into the sea, survives thanks to seals, who hear the hiss (Kivirähk 212). Similarly, Leemet, who has fallen into a cellar with broken bones, survives thanks to the snake words, which penetrate through the ground to the snakes, unlike the boy's screams (140), so that he is rescued by snakes. Not knowing or appreciating the nonhuman language becomes fateful in several instances: Leemet's father is killed by a bear which had been confused by the man speaking German, and even Tabet, defender of all that is ancient, dies not knowing the ancient world's language. In the world where everyone else has forgotten the language, Leemet understands its specific power—one correctly pronounced snake word can help kill another being or save a life.

The agentic power to act out becomes most vividly manifest in Leemet and his grandfather—the naturalcultural hybrids of a snake and a human—unleashing a war against the new world. The grandfather, for instance, stretches back his head and howls, plunging down onto the village like a bird—with a long beard, sharp crooked nails and unnaturally short legs (340). They become like wild animals: “We laughed, roaring, howled like wolves and hissed like snakes. We never washed ourselves and the enemy's bloodstain covered us all over, so that we looked like skinned carrions” (344). Although Leemet and the grandfather function as symbols of the confluence of nature and culture, this motif of “natureculture” dissolves finally. That is, with the arrival of Christianity, the villagers choose culture over nature, moving away from their ancient wisdom of snakish and denying their former ties to the forest creatures. As nature and culture are no longer mutually constituted, the intra-active process whereby the natural and the cultural co-emerge and co-become also dissolves.

Nevertheless, the forest and the village still indicate signs of a mutual interest. While the forest dwellers sometimes longingly observe the village on its periphery, the villagers have no plan to return, but the forest still remains in their imagination in a deformed manner. That is, while they deny the existence of snakish, they want to learn the (non-existent) bird language by killing the snake king and eating its crown (301). In Ints's view, the villagers are “poor flies” (320). And, indeed, the villagers become the murderers, although snakes could have been their brothers.

Leemet is among the ones who crosses the periphery to the village, returning nevertheless to his home among the snakes. Through such movements, he also demonstrates that

the world itself changed around me. Metaphorically said: there, where dry land used to be, now surged the sea, and I had not managed to grow myself gills; I still gasped for breath with my old lungs, which didn't pass for anything in the new world, and that is why I constantly lacked air. I tried to escape the approaching water and dig myself a nest in the sand, but each subsequent wave thwarted my efforts until there was neither a nest nor a shore. (316)

This process highlights fluidity and an ongoing change, pointing toward the need to recognise such a flow of processes. It is in this process that nature and culture form, transform, and intra-act—leading somewhere to extinctions and elsewhere to the surging of new life. Both the villagers and the last forest dwellers belong to the material world, which is constituted in their reciprocal becoming. In Stacy Alaimo's vein, such a world could also be characterised as "an emergent world" (*Bodily* 143). Through such emergences, Leemet also finds the Northern Frog, becoming its guardian and he sleeps by the side of the giant reptile. With Leemet representing the last naturalcultural being in the fast changing world, *The Man Who Spoke Snakish*, thus, narrates a dynamic world where humans and forest dwellers finally retreat into their respective worlds.

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