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FROM BIRDS AND TREES TO TEXTS: AN ECOSEMIOTIC LOOK AT ESTONIAN NATURE WRITING

1. Introduction

Estonia is a relatively small patch of land by the Baltic Sea, in the temperate climate zone where forest is the climax ecosystem – that is, if nature is left on its own, sooner or later the result will be dense coniferous forest. As in the rest of Northern Europe, the human impact on local landscapes has been moderate but persistent over the past millennium, resulting in a range of semi-natural communities, such as wooded meadows, alvars, coastal meadows, floodplain meadows, broad-leaved forests, etc. Semi-natural communities are developed and maintained in close co-operation between humans and domesticated animals for whom these areas serve as pasture and provide a source of fodder. There are also relatively wild areas, such as sea coasts, bogs, mires and old growth forests in Estonia that have experienced only very mild human impact over the centuries. These landscapes have predominantly been shaped by the forces of nature, but even here there is always the human-and-animal influence upon the landscapes in the background.

Time-wise, the tradition of Estonian-language nature writing can be traced back to the educational literature of the late 18th century. Starting from the early 19th century, reading material about natural wonders and phenomena would be published in calendars and periodicals on a regular basis. During the national awakening movement in the second half of 19th century when Estonian civil society emerged, binding the nation together using common

topics, motifs and rhetorical devices became increasingly more important. Estonian soil and the local people's creative connection with it by means of agricultural activities was emphasised in poetry, in prose, and in instructional writing. As Estonia became an independent state in 1918, the sedentary country people would need ever more information about their homeland, its different parts and valuable characteristics by means of printed word that would

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provide knowledge about their native land and inspire love of the country in them. Nature writing played an indispensable part in this process. During the third decade of the 20th century a wave of nature writing appeared that consisted of travelogues and hiking memoirs, as well as almanacs dedicated to introducing areas of interest to domestic tourism. It involved nature writing in its most characteristic forms, such as documentary prose, autobiographical essays, and travel stories. The core of Estonian nature writing from the 1920s and 1930s consists of nature observations with an emphasis on plants and birds.

Estonian nature writing did not evolve in an empty space. During the first decades of the 20th century a substantial amount of high-quality nature writing was translated from Russian (Dmitri Kaigorodov, Valerian Lunkevich, Vitali Bianki), German (Carl Ewald, Herman Löns, Manfred Kyber, Hermann Wagner), Swedish (Selma Lagerlöf, Bengt Berg), and English (Ernest Seton-Thompson, Jack London). Educated Estonians of the times could read and speak both German (the language of the local nobility) and Russian (the official language of the Czarist state) and thus influences from cultures based on these languages were presumably significantly stronger than actually reflected in the translations. A case in point is, for example, Alfred Edmund Brehm whose *Stories of Animal Life* was available in German and in Russian, but was never translated into Estonian. Regardless, a number of Estonian books of nature writing (by Karl August Hindrey, Johannes Käis, as well as the illustrations in an Estonian translation of Kaigorodov) refer to Brehm as a source of substantial influence.

WWII caused a rupture in Estonian culture, including Estonian nature writing. After the war, Estonian refugees in the West compiled books of landscape photography to commemorate their lost homeland. In Estonia, people were denied access to many previously significant areas of nature, such as the coast (including Vilsandi) that now constituted the westernmost border zone of the USSR¹; the bogs and forests (including Alutaguse) as places of

underground resistance against the Soviet occupation, and former holiday destinations that were subsequently turned into oil shale mines or grounds for military practice. Still, the pre-war tradition of Estonian nature writing was continued when the collection *Pictures and Sounds from the Nature of Homeland* by Johannes Piiper, Professor of Zoology at the University of Tartu, that had originally been published in 1935, was re-issued in 1948.² Other authors who continued publishing nature writing and animal stories were Kustas Põldmaa, Eerik Kumari and Richard Roht.

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In 1957, the Nature Protection Act was passed in Estonia, pioneering the process in the whole USSR. As new nature protection areas were established, books describing places of natural beauty, their natural and cultural history regained their status. In the 1970s a new generation of nature essayists emerged that included Fred Jüssi and Edgar Kask. In the wake of the translation of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* by Ain Raitviir into Estonian in 1968, a new focus appeared in Estonian nature writing, a shift from local, small-scale protection of aesthetically pleasing objects to the perception of a looming global environmental crisis, and to contemporary human impact on large ecosystems. The substantial core of the tradition of Estonian nature writing, however, has remained bound to aesthetic natural objects and valuable local ecosystems. Critical reflections of human impact upon natural environment also usually stem from local nature experience.

In Estonian nature writing, certain areas of the country appear to be particularly often represented in texts. We have chosen two such areas as our examples: the island of Vilsandi with the Vaika bird islets in its immediate vicinity is the oldest bird protection area in the Baltic states (authors: Alma Toom, Franz Xaver Graf von Zedtwitz, Fred Jüssi, Tõnu Õnnepalu), and Muraka Bog in Alutaguse region, a remote piece of wilderness that has been attracting hikers, writers and photographers for almost a century (authors: Juhan Lepasaar, Edgar Kask, Fred Jüssi, Tiit Leito). Although inspired by the same natural regions, these texts are diverse and bear the marks of the textual strategies and conventions of their times of creation. It is interesting to observe how different authors have been following one another's footsteps – either in the landscape or in the textual practices. Similarities and differences between the texts with and deviations from one another's texts are caused by natural conditions as well as by cultural conventions. The two case-studies stand for the natural

diversity of Estonia. In the broad sense they also correspond to the historical distinction between coastal and inland rural cultures in Estonia. Both areas feature natural environments untouched by human agricultural activity, the closest to what we could call *wilderness* or *pristine nature* in Estonia.

2. Ecosemiotic framework

Our theoretical and methodological standpoint in the present discussion is semiotics of the environment, or ecosemiotics. Semiotic research focuses on the mechanisms of meaning making, as it happens in communication and interpretation. Classic semiotic analysis concerns human

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cultural activities and artefacts, such as literature, film, art, advertising, etc. Ecosemiotics focuses on sign relations or semiosis between cultural phenomena and the environment and analyses their types, hierarchy, outcomes and dynamics. This understanding implies that human semiotic activities should be considered as taking place among a multitude of sign processes and semiotic systems of other species, some partly accessible to us, some rather different from ours. Ecosemiotics as a research paradigm emerged in the early 1990s.³

Depending on the context and the research object, ecosemiotics makes use of the concepts of zoosemiotics and of biosemiotic criticism.⁴ Ecosemiotic approach is locally rooted, as it derives from biosemiotics of Jakob von Uexküll and cultural semiotics of Yuri

Lotman - authors that both lived and worked in Estonia. Semiotics provides suitable tools for analysing cultural and natural diversity and the great number of border zones and boundaries that meet in the Estonian environment. In the following, we discuss the central theoretical concepts that are subsequently applied to the semiotic study of chosen examples of Estonian nature writing.

2.1. Texts and culture are locally situated

For ecosemiotic approach the relationship between a text of nature writing and its object(s) of representation is never absolute or fixed, but depends on the knowledge of the reader, on the seasonal and temporal changes that occur in the environment and in animal behaviour, etc.

Cultural texts and artefacts attach themselves to various semiotic anchoring points in the local environment that has a semiotic character and potential.⁵ In this respect, culture–nature relations, always have a history and are locally contextualised. The locality of a text can lie in its references to specific climatic, vegetational or fauna-related features, but also in more subtle details, such as references to folklore, vernacular names of species and places, local inhabitants and their practices, that can often be even micro-regional.

From the semiotic perspective, a written text and the environment are tied together in multiple ways: by *representative*, *mimetic*, *motivational* and *complementary* relations. Different types of meaning relations can be active at the same time, they can combine in complex ways and interact with one another. On the most basic level, the nature essay *represents* the environment in a certain culture-specific way and through the interpretation of a particular author. Nature writing can be *mimetic* in the sense that the structure or the narrative of the text can repeat certain environmental

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or physical sequences. For instance, in an animal story the sequence of the events can be determined by the actual biological life cycle or the daily activities of the animal.

At the same time the text and the environment can be in a *complementary* relationship so that the reader’s experience of the text and of the environment become actualised simultaneously in the reading process, and mutually support each other. In such a case, not all the meaning relations potentially present in the environment need to be represented in the text, yet the author presumes that his/her readers are familiar with the common characteristics and properties of the environment. In case of a complementarity relation, interpretative loops emerge between the text and the environment; the text is interpreted with reference to the environmental experience and the environment is interpreted on the basis of textual knowledge. The environment with its characteristics and potentials may even *motivate* the author – and the readers – to choose a specific type of textual representation.

To explicate and explain these interconnections between nature writing and the environment, the model of *nature-text* has been proposed. In this model, ecosemiotic research is considered to have at least a double object: “in addition to the written text that speaks about nature and points to nature, it should also include the depicted part of the natural environment itself, which must be, for the relation to be functional, to at least some extent textual or at least

textualizable”.⁶ In order to incorporate the environment into ecosemiotic analysis of literature, an elaborate model of the relations between the text and the environment is needed as a tool for analysis. The complexity of a literary work must also be taken into account: it is multi-layered, modelling the environmental relations of the particular author, in the contextual conditions of the particular culture and era, as well as of the particular literary conventions. The formal characteristics of nature writing – the literary and narrative strategies employed in the text – are often organised and shaped according to the particular environmental relationship it represents. Thus, the nature-text model asks what kind of literary devices are there to convey what kind of human-environment relation (message) in the context of what kind of environment.

2.2. The Umwelt perspective is taken into account

The ecosemiotic approach is deeply indebted to Umwelt theory, proposed in 1909 by Jakob von Uexküll, a Baltic-German biologist.⁷ Umwelt refers to the complex life-world consisting of an animal and the part of the environment

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it lives in as a mutually bound entity. Uexküll argues that those and only those parts of the environment to which an animal is meaningfully linked are present for it and are contained in its subjective universe or Umwelt.

In regard to human cultural activities and artefacts, Hungarian-American semiotician Thomas A. Sebeok has distinguished between zoosemiotic modelling and linguistic or verbal modelling.⁸ The background for his ideas about the notion of modelling can be found in the Tartu-Moscow School of Semiotics that offered a theory of modelling systems in the framework of cultural semiotics, with a distinction made between primary, i.e. language-based, and secondary, i.e. artistic modelling.⁹ On the most general level, modelling can be described as a process of making sense of some processes or phenomena with the help of (internal or external) representations that are at least partly based on analogies.¹⁰ According to Sebeok, we possess two mutually sustaining modelling systems – the anthroposemiotic verbal one, which is unique to the human species, and the zoosemiotic nonverbal one, which is Umwelt-based and unites us with the world of other animals.¹¹ Direct and spatial perceptions,

tactile and olfactory sensations, as well as many occurrences of nonverbal communication belong to the sphere of nonverbal modelling.

We propose that works of nature writing be considered as models of human–environment relationships. Combining Sebeok’s and Lotman’s ideas, three different layers of modelling can be suggested to appear in a work of nature writing: zoosemiotic modelling, linguistic modelling and artistic modelling.¹² In case of a literary work, the level of artistic modelling is of primary importance; however, as a rule elements of zoosemiotic and linguistic modelling are also present in it, especially as its primary objects of representation are the mutual relations of humans with the environment, and with other species.

2.3. Texts and their reception form an intertextual ecosystem

An ecosemiotic understanding of the hierarchical diversity of sign processes as well as different types of modelling relations between an organism (including a human one) and the environment also encompasses human intellectual activities. A text of nature writing is a representational model of the meaning relations that a writer has perceived in the environment under specific conditions, determined by the time, location, and the biological and cultural abilities of the perceiver. Nature writing renders these perceptions using written verbal language, an exclusively human

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means of communication. Moreover, a literary text makes use of different poetic and rhetorical devices, such as metaphors and surprising twists in the plot. Literary criticism itself can be regarded as one among many modelling practices by which humans make sense of their surroundings.

Texts are bound together by means of intertextuality. Intertextuality can directly manifest itself in a set of texts sharing certain genre conventions – in case of nature writing, these are often the requirements of non-fiction, such as being informed of natural history, stating the author’s ethical standpoint, making references to literary forms such as pastoral or jeremiad.¹³ Intertextuality on the level of verbal modelling includes quotations, references to the titles by other authors, mentioning of their names in subsequent nature writing. Texts of nature writing can also be linked indirectly through the references to the same locations, itineraries, seasons,

species, or particular natural phenomena. Intertextual references are not limited to written texts, but may embrace representations of nature that are based on visual, auditory or other sensory experiences.

3. Case studies

3.1. In the Western Estonian archipelago

Our first study area, Vilsandi is Estonia's westernmost inhabited island in the Baltic Sea, with a surface of about nine square kilometres. At the beginning of the 20th century the island had approximately 200 permanent inhabitants: there were 32 farmsteads, a small military unit and a lighthouse with its crew. At present, Vilsandi's population consists of 16 people. Bird protection has been practised there since 1906: the Vaika bird sanctuary was the first official nature protection site in the whole Czarist Russia. The first local enthusiast to protect the breeding islets of the waterfowl was Artur Toom, the then lighthouse keeper who later developed nature tourism in Vilsandi and on the surrounding islets. Nature writing about Vilsandi emerged and reached its heyday during that period.

WWII had disastrous results in Vilsandi: during the war, bird islets were vandalised and nests destroyed, Toom deported to Siberia, the islands declared a closed military zone. Nature protection was re-implemented only in 1957, but at the time visiting Vilsandi was allowed for scientific purposes only. Ordinary people could "peek" into the nature reserve only via nature writing. Currently, Vilsandi National Park embraces approximately 160 islets and rocky elevations in the coastal sea around Vilsandi where waterfowl and seals are breeding, and it has re-gained its reputation as a valued nature tourism destination, thus

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resulting in new nature writing. The relatively small and remote area is "covered" with a remarkably dense layer of literary representations.

Artur Toom, the initiator of bird protection in Vilsandi, was a great storyteller, relating strongly anthropomorphising stories about the birds' „family life“, their faithlessness and male seabirds' general lack of fatherly instincts to his visitors. He hardly wrote anything himself, but the book *Vilsandi Linnuriik* [*Vilsandi Bird Kingdom*] by his wife Alma Toom, published in Tartu in 1932, relies mostly on his stories, and promotes his position as „the Bird King“. ¹⁴ In addition to

rendering her husband's stories, Alma Toom describes the looks and habits of the waterfowl nesting on Vaika islets through an artistic lense, yet also looks at them with the eye of a naturalist. High-quality nature photographs by two German photographers, Ecke and Brandt, also contribute to the good overall impression. Toom's book describes the birds, following the order of their arrival in spring: sea gulls, sterna, mergansers, schelducks, oystercatcher (*Haematopus ostralegus*). Waterfowl belonging to the *Anatidae* family is introduced: eiders, tufted duck (*Aythya fuligula*), goosanders and mergansers. Coastal people's vernacular beliefs and practices associated with waterfowl are present in Toom's accounts; for example, she mentions that the chicks of merganser and schelduck are able to form emotional bonds with humans, a claim further elaborated in August Mälk's bird stories. She also mentions collecting the eggs of waterfowl in springtime that is a widely known popular practice. The eggs of common eider (*Somateria mollissima*), goosander (*Mergus merganser*), red-breasted merganser (*Mergus serrator*) and common shelduck (*Tadorna tadorna*) have traditionally served as an addition to the diet of both the coastal people as well as their domestic animals. Toom's approach is exemplary in its qualities of locality, situatedness, and mimetic relations. Her book is narrated from a point of view that is markedly local, and its spatial scope is limited to the islets of the bird sanctuary. Structured according to bird phenology, the book mimetically follows the migration and life cycles of the birds.

An interesting counterpart to it, representing an outsider's take on Vilsandi, is *Vogelkinder der Waikariffe* [*Birdlings of Vaikas*] by Franz Xaver Graf Zedtwitz, German photographer and nature writer, published in Berlin in 1933.¹⁵ Both authors pay attention to the same species, places, and stories, and interpret these, drawing on the knowledge of one another's work, observations, and itineraries. An author of a piece of nature writing is at the same time a reader and a commentator on his or her colleagues. The books by Toom and Zedtwitz are clearly part of the same intertextual ecosystem.

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August Mälk and Johannes Piiper also contributed to this intertextually united group of writers with their pieces from the 1930s. Mälk, a writer native of the island of Saaremaa, published a book *Lugusid lindudest* [*Bird Stories*] in 1934.¹⁶ His waterfowl breeding stories are based on his actual observations in Vilsandi. Although he anthropomorphises his bird characters rather markedly, he is taking the peculiarities of the bird Umwelt into account even

more than the previously discussed authors. For example, one of his stories is about an eider who dies in a fishing net while diving. A net would generally have no active meaning in an eider's Umwelt; neither are underwater nets made for catching birds. An accidental encounter proves to have a fatal meaning, as the diving bird cannot find a way back out of the funnel-shaped net. Whereas Toom and Zedtwitz observe birds from a naturalists's point of view, Mälk's more empathetic approach enables him to better incorporate the perspective of bird Umwelten into his writing.

Two more naturalists to be discussed are Johannes Piiper, the grand old man of Estonian nature writing, with his collection *Pilte ja hääli kodumaa loodusest* [*Pictures and Sounds from the Nature of our Homeland*, 1935],¹⁷ and Fred Jüssi, whose *Kajakad kutsuvad* [*The Call of the Gulls*, 1966] describes the main species of breeding birds in Vilsandi (gulls, merganser, oystercatcher, eider, song birds).¹⁸ Jüssi also discusses the actual work of nature protection, as well as the possibilities of commercial use of eiderdown, echoing thus the ideology of the Soviet state that nature must be of practical use to people. In Piiper's case, motivationality is manifested in his pieces always bearing exact dates; also the time of the day is indicated quite precisely, as well as the route taken. The number of species mentioned in his texts is remarkably greater than in the case of other authors. In the manner of a thorough naturalist, he takes a small portion of the landscape and provides its micro-description: the plant species he notices growing, their colour and stage of vegetation; the insects and invertebrates that are visible and active; the birds heard and what their songs are like. As a rule, no ugly or shocking things, such as decaying bodies or spoiled landscapes, are mentioned, although he frequently points out that birds seem to feel disturbed by approaching humans, and that some chicks are trampled by the visitors because of the chicks' immaculate disguise.

Contextual information plays an important role in the most recent book in the long row of Vilsandi representations, *Lõpetuse ingel* [*Angel of Conclusion*, 2015] by Tõnu Õnnepalu.¹⁹ In many ways, this work is a counter-balance to the previous tradition of Vilsandi nature writing. The time frame is set around the autumn migration of birds, instead of

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the spring migration or the breeding season featured by earlier authors. This choice has its impact on the level of artistic modelling – the autumn migration suggests an ending, departure, decay, instead of the atmosphere full of hopes and expectations of a breeding

season, contributing to the author's overall sentiment of concluding a certain time period in his life. It also facilitates linguistic modelling in rendering the bird sounds.²⁰

3.2. In the North-East Estonian woodlands

The second case study of this paper focuses on the representation of the nature of North-East Estonia. Alutaguse, the region between the eastern end of the Gulf of Finland in the Baltic Sea and the Northern part of Lake Peipsi, is mostly covered by bogs and forests and is home to many large mammals such as wolves, bears and elks. It is probably the area in Estonia that has least been affected by humans and that gives refuge to several endangered species, for example the flying squirrel (*Pteromys volans*), the peregrine falcon (*Falco peregrinus*), and others. Until recently, there has been relatively little industrial agriculture and forestry in the Alutaguse region because of its inaccessible landscape (bogs, forests). At the same time, the geographical conditions have supported small farms, local communities and traditional activities such as hunting, bee-keeping, collecting cranberries and cloudberries. The history of remote single farms in the Alutaguse woods may indeed be traced back for several centuries.

The present case study focuses on books by two authors who have written extensively about the Alutaguse region: Juhan Lepasaar and Edgar Kask.²¹ Both authors are self-educated writers: Juhan Lepasaar (b. 1921) was recruited into the German Army during WWII and lived in the forests as an illegal guerrilla fighter after the war. Due to this, his career choices were limited during the Soviet era and he worked as a truck driver for most of his life. Edgar Kask (b. 1930) worked in land improvement and environmental management until he became a freelance writer and photographer in the 1970s. For these men as well as for many other Estonian nature essayists, thinking and writing about forests was an intellectual escape route from the oppressiveness of the surrounding Soviet reality.

The books of both authors have recognisably similar structures: they are extremely heterogeneous collections that include reflections about the Alutaguse landscapes, the various components, species, and places of these; stories of local people, their opinions and folklore; chapters dedicated to different wild animals and encounters with them; observations on phenological data and environmental change; recollections of personal

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experiences, poems and autobiographical information. Different storylines involving people, culture, and nature run parallel in these books, the text as a whole creates a meshwork out of the individual story lines.²² As such, the structure of the books represents the artistic modelling and marks a sensitive relation to the local conditions. The authorial position manifested in such structures is characterised by the lack of binary oppositions in positioning human and animals, nature and culture, the past and the future. For instance, both Lepasaar's as well as Kask's attitudes to signs of modernisation in Alutaguse are quite neutral: mostly they just describe building railroads, advancing the electricity grid and land improvement as a part of a social and cultural process.²³

The perception that the authors as well as their books are associated by intertextual ties becoming a part of a common "ecosystem". Kask and Lepasaar became connected by walking the same forest trails and being in the same environment. They also know each other personally and their books include common motifs, for instance stories about the foresters' family of Meurasaare. They even explicitly mention each other in their texts. Juhan Lepasaar describes his meeting with Edgar Kask: "We are sitting with Edgar on thick wooden stumps in front of his cabin on the edge of Muraka Bog. The sun is pleasantly hot on our backs. [...] We exchange only rare sentences. The unexpected heat makes us languid, thoughts are wandering on their own".²⁴ Both men become characters in each other's writings, as the texts become meta-reflective, including references to the activities of nature photography and nature writing.

References to tracks or traces are present in the titles of four of the books referred to above – *On the Marsh Tracks*, *On the Forest Paths*, *The Road to Silence*, *A Journey to the Sun*. The motif of a road is used in many chapter titles, too, and, indeed, it is of central importance for the environmental experience in Alutaguse: "According to the popular jokes, even the dead could not be brought out of a faraway forest village where there were no roads in the summer; they were put on the poles laid across the beams in the threshing room to dry in the smoke and were brought to the parish cemetery to be buried there only with the winter roads."²⁵ The notion of the road suits the style of writing as well as the ideological undercurrents of the books. Roads and paths are related to the local tradition and memory – roads connect people; if roads are not used, the forest will claim them again. The books repeatedly mention the secret tracks in the bogs that local people have used as shortcuts and hideouts. A meeting

point between a traveller and the environment, the road also brings about new experiences. For instance, the human track can cross the tracks of wolves, who have

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their own Umwelt, their ways of living and chasing the prey, but who have also learned to use irrigation ditches for easier movement in the forests.²⁶

One specific topic that is present in the books of both authors is the discussion of experiences related to getting lost in the forest. It is easy to get lost in vast forest areas, while there is little possibility of getting lost on the islets that constitute the other of our case study environments. In the experience of getting lost, a shift occurs in the relations between the human and the environment: the human loses his/her control over the environment and the forest gains the agency in directing his/her movement. Conscious, language-based modelling of the environment gives ground to more primordial, pre-linguistic and zoosemiotic modelling.

Juhan Lepasaar writes about his experience of losing his way in the forest: “Go to the great woods of Alutaguse and look up as you walk, towards the tops of the trees branching out, leave the ground unnoticed, never pay attention to it. Minutes go by, the weather is windless and cloudy, the winter has shaped the trees uniform, so similar to one another, so alike in appearance. And henceforth, without you noticing, Alutaguse has caught you in its web.”²⁷ He continues: “Even some fear creeps into the chest as images of a vague danger are becoming stronger and the reality is receding. We wade through the snow for yet another kilometre or so, then I start feeling a cramp in my left leg from overexertion. I am stumbling along with difficulty now. No, I cannot remain in the forest, I have to go on. My hat and my fur coat are stiff from the cold and covered with frost like the trees of the forest, the only difference seems to be that the forest is standing still, while I, in my coat and hat, am trying to move on at all cost.”

Edgar Kask describes a similar situation when he suggested that a group of friends should take a shortcut in Muraka Bog. Alas, as his instructions were not sufficiently accurate, the people ended up in danger of getting lost.²⁸ Such stories foreground a deep connection between the people and the environment that can emerge only from a real and two-sided encounter with nature. The author is willing to denounce his position as a specialist with good knowledge of nature, he acknowledges his restrictions and admits the possibility of making mistakes. Edgar Kask has given his essay about being lost the title *Lolluse mõõdupuu* [*The*

Measure of Stupidity], indicating that human ignorance or recklessness is the main reason behind such experiences. The chance of getting lost underlines the necessity of learning the signs of the environment and showing due respect to nature.

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Discussion and conclusions

Our theoretical standpoint of this paper is that nature writing works as a model of the specific environmental relationships of the particular culture and era. When analysing individual texts we can ask what kind of literary means are present to convey what kind of environmental experience in relation to what kind of environment. Both coastal and forest-bound local traditions of nature writing are connected by some general common features, from cross-referring between different authors to complex interplay between the local environmental conditions, cultural history and the characteristic features of nature writing as a modelling system.

In the case of nature writing about Vilsandi, the generally common features are the structure and the time frame. The individual essays are each dedicated to one species, its habits and breeding success. The time frame is set around spring and summer, the breeding season of the migratory waterfowl, the only exception being Önnepalu's work where the author's presence on the islet coincides with the autumn migration of birds. In the case of nature writing about the Alutaguse region by Kask and Lepasaar, the dominant feature appears to be the local diversity of the environmental experience and the meshwork-like-connections between the Alutaguse wilderness and the people living there. By having an intense local experience, the author, his life, recollections and style of expression are turned into a medium and a bridge between the reader and the environment, understood as a meshwork of culture and the diversity of nature, memories of the past and potentials of the present. The authors' personae are manifested in different stories, experiences and localities to the degree that the distinction between the author, the text and the referent, i.e., the natural environment, appears to dissolve.

In both cases, we can see that the texts are strongly bound to the locality, the local knowledge and popular practices. The relations between the texts and the environment are often motivational or complementary – aspects that require an additional effort from the reader who has to have some previous knowledge of the environment and its features (such as sounds), in order to fully understand the written text. We also detected instances of zoosemiotic

modelling, as well as the general awareness of the writers of the fact that all species – humans included – have their own peculiar ways of perceiving and relating to their surroundings. That way, pieces of nature writing become nature-texts, entities whose textual and natural components are virtually non-separable and mutually linked like elements of an ecosystem.

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NOTES

¹ USSR – Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, communist state (1922-1991) where Estonia was incorporated 1940-1991.

² Johannes Piiper, *Pilte ja hääli kodumaa loodusest: loodusesõbra muljeid maalt ja merelt*. [Pictures and sounds from the nature of homeland] (Tartu: Noor-Eesti, 1935).

³ For a historical overview, key principles and applications of ecosemiotics see Timo Maran, Kalevi Kull, “Ecosemiotics: main principles and current developments,” *Geografiska Annaler: Series B, Human Geography* 96, 1 (2014), pp. 41–50.

⁴ On zoosemiotics, see Timo Maran, “Dimensions of zoosemiotics: Introduction,” *Semiotica* (Double Special Issue: Dimensions of Zoosemiotics), 198 (2014), pp. 1–10; Dario Martinelli, *A Critical Companion to Zoosemiotics: People, Paths, Ideas*, Biosemiotics 5 (Berlin: Springer, 2010); on biosemiotics criticism, see Timo Maran, “Biosemiotic criticism: modelling the environment in literature,” *Green Letters: Studies in Ecocriticism* 18, 3 (2014), pp. 297–311.

⁵ Timo Maran, “Semiotization of matter. A hybrid zone between biosemiotics and material ecocriticism,” in Serenella Iovino, Serpil Oppermann (eds.), *Material Ecocriticism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014), pp. 141–154.

⁶ Timo Maran, “Towards an integrated methodology of ecosemiotics: The concept of nature-text,” *Sign Systems Studies* 35, 1/2 2007, pp. 269–294, 280.

⁷ For English translations of Uexküll’s major works, see Jakob von Uexküll, “The theory of meaning,” *Semiotica* 42, 1 (1982), pp. 25–82; Jakob von Uexküll, “A stroll through the worlds of animals and men: A picture book of invisible worlds,” *Semiotica* 89, 4 (1992), pp. 319–391.

⁸ See, Thomas A. Sebeok, *A Sign Is Just A Sign* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991); Thomas A. Sebeok, ““Tell me, where is fancy bred?” The biosemiotic self”. *Thomas A. Sebeok. Global Semiotics*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), pp. 120–127.

⁹ See, Juri M. Lotman, “Primary and secondary communication-modeling systems,” in D.P. Lucid (ed.), *Soviet Semiotics: An Anthology* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), pp. 95–98.

¹⁰ Юрий Михайлович Лотман, “Тезисы к проблеме “Искусство в ряду моделирующих систем” [The place of art among other modelling systems],” *Труды по знаковым системам* (Sign Systems Studies) 3 (1967), pp. 130–145, 130.

¹¹ For an analysis of human–dog interaction see, for example, Louise Westling, “The zoosemiotics of sheep herding with dogs,” In Kadri Tüür, Morten Tønnessen (eds.), *The Semiotics of Animal Representations* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2014), pp. 33–52.

¹² For application of these categories in analysis, see Maran, “Biosemiotic criticism”.

¹³ See, Lawrence Buell, *The Environmental Imagination. Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (Cambridge, London: The Belknap Press, 1995).

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- ¹⁴ Alma Toom, *Vilsandi linnuriik* [Vilsandi bird kingdom] (Tartu: Loodus 1932).
- ¹⁵ Franz Xaver Graf von Zedtwitz, *Vogelkinder der Waikariffe* (Berlin: Verlag Scherl, 1933).
- ¹⁶ August Mälk, *Jutte lindudest* [Bird stories] (Tallinn: Eesti Õpetajate Liit, 1934).
- ¹⁷ Piiper, *Pilte ja hääli kodumaa loodusest: loodusesõbra muljeid maalt ja merelt*.
- ¹⁸ Fred Jüssi, *Kajakad kutsuvad* [The call of the gulls] (Tallinn: Eesti Raamat, 1966).
- ¹⁹ Tõnu Õnnepalu, *Lõpetuse ingel. Märkmeid sügissaarelt* [Angel of conclusion. Notes from an autumn island] (Tallinn: Kultuurileht, 2015).
- ²⁰ On the zoosemiotics of verbal modelling of bird sounds, see Kadri Tüür, “Bird sounds in nature writing: human perspective on animal communication,” *Sign Systems Studies* 37, 3/4, (2009), pp. 226–255.
- ²¹ Juhan Lepasaar, *Laaneteedel* [On the forest roads] (Tallinn: Valgus, 1989); Juhan Lepasaar, *Metsakandle keeltehelin* [Sounds of forest zither] (Oonurme: J. Lepasaar, 2011); Juhan Lepasaar, *Sooradadel* [On the marsh tracks] (Tartu: Pärändkoosluste Kaitse Ühing, 2011); Edgar Kask, *Tee Vaikusesse* [Road to silence] (Tallinn: Eesti Raamat, 1977); Edgar Kask, *Teekond päikeseni* [Journey to the sun] (Tallinn: E. Kask, 2006).
- ²² Meshwork in Tim Ingold’s sense is a multiple and interlaced patterns of movement and growth, see Tim Ingold, *Lines: A Brief History* (Oxon: Routledge, 2007), p. 75.
- ²³ Kask, *Teekond päikeseni*, 117; Lepasaar, *Laaneteedel*, p. 22.
- ²⁴ Lepasaar, *Sooradadel*, p. 66.
- ²⁵ Lepasaar, *Laaneteedel*, p. 9.
- ²⁶ Lepasaar. *Laaneteedel*, p. 78.
- ²⁷ Lepasaar, *Laaneteedel*, p. 119.
- ²⁸ Kask, *Teekond päikeseni*, p. 127.