

Emplacement and Narrative Identity in Tomas Bannerhed's *Korparna*

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Abstract

In Tomas Bannerhed's *Korparna* (*The Ravens*, 2011), birds and trees not only function as backdrop and setting but contribute toward forming the characters' narrative identities and sense of place. In this article, I explore historical and literary sources from Småland—the historical province in Sweden where *Korparna* is set—to assess how Bannerhed interprets and elaborates on cultural values and traditions. Drawing on Forrest Clingerman's concept of "emplacement," I explicate the interplay between conflicting environmental interpretations, recognizing that places can be described based on the historical record or on ornithological and botanical data, but that folklore and mythology also contribute to local meaning-making. In the context of *Korparna*, I argue that birding can be a meaningful way of engaging with a place, a form of naturalist enthusiasm that fosters deep local knowledge. Finally, I show that relations with nonhumans can be constitutive of a variety of conflicting but partly overlapping environmental identities.

Keywords: birds, emplacement, environmental hermeneutics, Tomas Bannerhed.

Resumen

En *Korparna* (*Los Cuervos*, 2011) de Tomas Bannerhed, las aves y los árboles no solamente funcionan como telón de fondo y escenario, sino que contribuyen a formar las identidades narrativas y el sentido del lugar de los personajes. En este artículo exploro las fuentes históricas y literarias de Småland, la provincia histórica de Suecia donde está ambientada *Korparna*, para evaluar cómo Bannerhed interpreta y elabora los valores y tradiciones culturales. Basándome en el concepto de "emplazamiento" de Forrest Clingerman, explico la interacción entre las interpretaciones ambientales conflictivas, reconociendo que los lugares pueden describirse basándose en el registro histórico o en datos ornitológicos y botánicos, pero que el folclore y la mitología también contribuyen a la creación del significado del lugar. En el contexto de *Korparna*, sostengo que la observación de aves puede ser una forma significativa de relacionarse con el lugar, una forma de entusiasmo naturalista que fomenta el profundo conocimiento local. Finalmente, muestro que las relaciones con los seres no humanos pueden ser constitutivas de una variedad de identidades ambientales conflictivas, aunque a la vez parcialmente superpuestas.

Palabras clave: aves, emplazamiento, hermenéutica medioambiental, Tomas Bannerhed.

Introduction

Set in a rural landscape undergoing large-scale changes, and packed with references to birds and plants, Tomas Bannerhed's debut novel *Korparna* (*The*

Ravens, 2011)¹ would seem to lend itself well to ecocritical readings. Yet, despite winning the prestigious August Prize and being made into an award-winning feature film, it has received scant attention from literary scholars. While *Korparna* can be read as a coming-of-age novel and has some attributes of a historical novel (enacting and problematizing processes of cultural change), it is above all a psychological novel, and can function as an entry point for examining different interpretations of place and landscape. In this article, I examine how the main characters' interactions with nonhumans are mediated by norms, values and traditions that foster different ways of reading the environment.

Environmental hermeneutics takes as its starting point that we assign meaning to nature through historically situated processes of cultural interpretation (Drenthen 170). Of particular relevance for this study is Forrest Clingerman's concept of "emplacement." Analogously to how Paul Ricoeur, in his narrative analysis, resolves the paradox of temporality in narrative through "emplotment," Clingerman applies this approach to place, arguing that our interpretations of nature must account for how we are spatially and temporally situated within it (21). Even though we are clearly "part of nature," in our interpretation we rely on culture and philosophy to approach nature as an object, so that, paradoxically, we are "simultaneously transcending and situated beings" (19). Emplacement involves ecology, aesthetics, resources and community, and none of these categories on its own is sufficient to provide a full view of our situatedness in nature (23).

Reading *Korparna* as a narrative of emplacement, I explore how the character Klas and his father Agne are emplaced in contrasting but partly overlapping ways. Though these are round characters, who cannot be reduced to types, their differences refer to generation conflicts, at least to some extent, as socioeconomic conditions have changed and cultural values have shifted. Where labor and utility were once paramount, and still are to Agne, the rise of environmentalism, which informs Klas's worldview, calls for a cultural shift from needing to have control over nonhumans to striving for coexistence with them. Since Klas is a birder, I also consider how ornithological practice relates to emplacement, drawing on the work of the cultural anthropologist Michael Hundeide.

I begin with a brief presentation of the novel's setting and context, then move on to explore how emplacement in *Korparna* relates to (1) birding, (2) folklore, mythology and symbolism; and (3) cultural heritage and biodiversity. Finally, I place Clingerman's theory of "emplacement" in dialogue with John van Buren's critical environmental hermeneutics in order to analyze the environmental identities and values that emerge.

¹ *Korparna* has been translated into English by Sarah Death and published as *The Ravens*, but, considering that her translation at some points diverges from the original in significant ways, I refer to the original Swedish text, and all translations are mine.

Setting and Context

Korparna is narrated by Klas in the first person, mostly in the past tense but occasionally shifting to the present tense for brief sections of inner monologue or dream-like sequences, some of which are italicized. Events are narrated chronologically, with references to the past mostly presented in the form of dialogue where characters refer to past experiences.

The novel is set in a rural area in the historical province of Småland in southern Sweden during the 1970s, where twelve-year-old Klas is set to inherit the farm *Undantaget* from his aging and increasingly unstable father Agne and dreads it. In Swedish, the term *undantaget* usually refers to a smaller house separate from the main farmhouse where, traditionally, the farmer's grandparents or other relatives would live. Calling an entire farm, with fields and all, *Undantaget*, thereby suggests that it was once part of a larger farm and consists of marginal land.²

On the whole, Klas is clever, curious and quick to learn, but he is wary of work, unable to summon any enthusiasm for mundane tasks like sowing and reaping the crops. The thought of spending his life working on the farm strikes him as crushingly boring, and besides, it is dubious whether the farm is even economically viable, as the plot of land is simply not large enough to be competitive. While Agne cannot face up to this, Klas is torn between his longing to get away and his eagerness to please his father. Migratory birds arriving from far-off corners of the world nourish his dreams of escape.

Klas builds a kite modeled after the dimensions of a white-tailed eagle—supposedly “the only bird that can't be killed by lightning” (*Korparna* 406)³—and when he flies it, he imagines that he himself takes wing, though another part of him hopes that his father is watching (403). Gazing at an aspen leaf, he sees its veins as “rivers flooding a foreign country” (8)⁴ and falls into a daydream of distant lands. He lets it fall into the stream and thinks of its long journey to the ocean, all the landscapes it will pass through, until he can no longer see it in his mind's eye (12). “The aspen and me,” thinks Klas. “We who tremble at the slightest thing” (8).⁵

As Lawrence Buell has pointed out, freeing oneself from “the curse of purposefulness” can be a path toward engaging more directly with place, to the extent that the materiality of one's environment can be experienced as continuous with one's self (Buell 154). The act of questioning “the validity of the self as the primary focalizing device” and daring “to imagine nonhuman agents as bona fide partners”—be they an eagle or an aspen—is a form of literary ecocentrism that can allow the ego

² Translated directly to English, *Undantaget* means “the Exception,” as in an exception from the rule or something that holds an exceptional position. *Undan* can mean “away,” “aside,” or “out of the way,” while *taget* suggests something that has been “taken” hold of or “gripped.” It is implicit that, one way or the other, the farm has been “set aside.”

³ “den enda fågeln som inte kan dödas av blixten” (*Korparna* 406).

⁴ “floder som spred sig över ett främmande land” (*Korparna* 8).

⁵ “Aspen och jag, tänkte jag. Vi som darrar för minsta lilla” (*Korparna* 8).

to be subsumed by its environment, of which it is already a part (179). Klas finds meaning in his encounters with nonhumans, though there may also be an element of escapism involved.

Birding as a Form of Emplacement

Birds are Klas's great passion, but it is not made clear how he gained his extensive ornithological knowledge. Some of it could perhaps be traced to his father—who knows the birds that come and go on the farm, though he does not share Klas's obsessive enthusiasm for them—but much of it is obviously from ornithological literature. It appears somewhat unrealistic that a twelve-year-old would be as proficient a birder as Klas: his identification skills suggest not only knowledge, but extensive field experience that would normally take several seasons to acquire. Klas keeps paging through his bird book and—based on a direct quote, placed in quotation marks, that Bannerhed includes about the challenges of identifying different races of yellow wagtail (*Korparna* 231)—it is evident that the book in question must be a volume by Delin and Svensson (probably from one or other of their Swedish titles, but see *Philip's Guide* 208). Since these are well-known, influential bird experts, not only in Sweden but in Europe as a whole, mentioning the source is unnecessary, and avid birders familiar with the literature might nod in recognition.

New horizons open for Klas when he meets Veronika, recently arrived from Stockholm, who lived in East Africa when she was younger and has a cosmopolitan orientation. Her parents are intellectual, well-read and artistic, in sharp contrast to the people Klas interacts with in his daily life. Veronika has traveled the world, experienced foreign cultures and met a wide range of people. For her, Småland is boring, but she is not attuned to what is going on there, neither to changes in nature nor to human intrigue. Where Klas harbors a close familiarity with the place, including the various bird species that inhabit it and the plants that grow there, Veronika is not invested in it at all. She tells Klas stories of the African bush, and Klas is captivated. He would certainly embrace the same kind of adventure if it were available to him, but he is where he is, and as long as he is trapped there, whether he likes the place or not is beside the point.

Klas takes Veronika to a lake, Madsjön, where they listen to birds calling at night, a precious opportunity for him to share his world. As they follow the distant booming of a bittern, they happen to flush a female bittern at close range in the torchlight, and find her eggs, a once-in-a-lifetime experience made all the more magical by Veronika's presence (*Korparna* 170–75). He succeeds in showing her that Småland, too, holds potential for meaningful experience. Veronika, however, goes off to the French Riviera with her parents for summer holidays, and then, to Klas's huge disappointment, moves back to Väsby to live with her mother while her father stays behind in the village. As Veronika's parents separate and her father's drunkenness gets the better of him, it becomes clear that her family, too, is dysfunctional. This casts the comparison with Klas's family in a different light, suggesting that existential

restlessness entails risks, that there might be something to be said for the predictability of tradition and the security of a solid base.

For Hundeide, increased knowledge of one's local patch through ornithological practice involves an aspect of what Heidegger and others have conceptualized as "dwelling": being at home in a place, inhabiting it actively (132). In times past, family affiliation was often crucial in determining where we cast our existential lot, and this still holds true to some extent. Nevertheless, in recent decades, the tendency to move more frequently, never settling down entirely, has led to a so-called rootlessness, or even "placelessness,"⁶ which, in *Korparna*, is exemplified by Veronika and her family. This may lead to a desire to belong, reflected in attempts to compensate for the lack of local attachments through engagement with place, for instance through field experience with local flora and fauna backed up by scientific knowledge (Hundeide 132). The modern disruption of local attachments does not entail a disruption of attachments per se, but it appears that attachments have become dispersed, perhaps even compartmentalized. If Agne's insistence on subduing the landscape through labor, on carrying forward his forefathers' legacy, is no longer relevant, Klas's mastery of bird calls and pursuit of rarities may be a legitimate alternative—an ecologically informed, less anthropocentric way of engaging with place.

Hundeide conceptualizes birding as a form of "natural historical enthusiasm" ("naturhistorisk entusiasme"), a dynamic process that requires creativity and involvement, so that the birder can achieve a state of "flow," where the mind, body and senses are engaged in the experience of nature (396–97, 434). Considering that this enthusiasm is often driven by a quest for novelty, leading to a sense of discovery, it could also be described as a form of Deleuzian "becoming" (Hundeide 396–97). Where "dwelling" is centered on a home or a base, "becoming" involves movement, even if only locally (398). Applied to *Korparna*, it is obvious that Agne is a dweller who can no longer imagine living anywhere else, but it is not yet clear what Klas will become; his options are still open, and though he has a strong attachment to Undantaget and to Småland, he is drawn to the nomadic existence Veronika has experienced. "Dwelling" and "becoming" are not mutually exclusive: on the contrary, "becoming" can follow from "dwelling," as an expansion of it. The nomadic can begin with the local; in some contexts, "dwelling" can even be a prerequisite for "becoming" (Hundeide 397).

Even more significant than the concepts of dwelling and becoming may be that of familiarity. The Norwegian ecophilosopher and mountaineer Nils Faarlund coined the phrase "familiarity leads to friendship,"⁷ which Hundeide applies to birding, arguing that familiarity based on perceptual engagement not only facilitates identification of regular species but also makes it easier to notice the rare species that stand out (117–19). When birders acquire a certain level of familiarity with and knowledge of the birds on their local patch, this can in turn lead to care. Moreover,

⁶ "stedløsheten" (Hundeide 132).

⁷ "kjennskap fører til vennskap" (Faarlund qtd. in Hundeide 117).

this also holds true for place, as the species birders encounter in a given area are inextricably bound up with their “emplacement” (Clingerman 23). In *Korparna*, this is reflected in how Klas and Agne have widely different interpretations of the same patch of land, Klas seeing it for its biodiversity, Agne for its utility. Though some may dismiss the pursuit of rare birds as esoteric, it can be a means of understanding the landscape—of increasing its resolution, in a sense, so that it can be viewed in full. It enriches Klas’s life and, in the cases when he succeeds in conveying its significance to others, also the lives of those around him.

Folklore, Mythology and Symbolism

Places are not only defined by the creatures that inhabit them but also by the stories that are told there. While places can be described based on the historical record, there are also literary, folkloric and mythological records that can be taken into account, which contribute to local meaning-making and form part of the fabric of residents’ lived experience. Barely a page of *Korparna* passes without a reference to some bird or plant, but in addition to ornithology and botany, the text is informed by tradition and folklore. Several species play symbolic roles, and the ravens that the novel’s title refers to are portents of impending disaster. Agne suffers auditory hallucinations in which he hears ravens crowing, and points out that, from the Vikings to the Romans, people have known that ravens flying across farmsteads are forewarnings of death (*Korparna* 113). As habitual scavengers and opportunistic predators (113), ravens are easy to condemn, but Klas takes their associations with Odin and death less seriously, and when he hears a raven crowing, interprets it as a greeting (252).

In bringing near-forgotten beliefs about trees and birds back into the light, showing how they can complement scientific knowledge and influence environmental values, Bannerhed reinvigorates the folklore of Småland. For Agne, the arrival of migratory birds in spring signals shifts in the weather, foretelling how the farming season will play out. As technical solutions have gained sway, these traditional ways of interpreting nature have all but disappeared, but for Agne, in the 1970s, it is still a living tradition and is not romanticized. Nor does he seem to be aware of any contradiction between reading the landscape through the language of birds and plants while relying on modern agricultural machinery and pesticides. Straddling traditional and industrial rurality, Agne epitomizes his time, and this appears to be one of the main causes of his woes and anxieties.

Cuckoos are rarely seen, but everybody knows their call (*I starens tid* 73). When Klas does a cuckoo imitation, a cuckoo comes flying, lands in a robin’s nest, shoves an egg out and lays its own. Realizing that he is complicit in the failure of the robins’ breeding attempt, Klas is aghast, and considers removing the cuckoo egg or destroying the nest so the robins will give up on it and build a new nest elsewhere

(*Korparna* 63–66).⁸ Agne talks about there being a morning service celebrating the cuckoo's return up at the village house, an annual tradition on Ascension Day, but Klas thinks to himself that there's "not much to celebrate about someone who lives off of others" (83).⁹ Klas feels an affinity with the cuckoo, and this fills him with shame: after all, he, too, is dependent on others, and reluctant to do his share of work. In this instance, it seems that Klas, not entirely unlike his father, has incorporated tradition into his worldview, and though he does not confuse it with science, he is on the verge of taking it as a moral guideline.

In his later non-fiction book *I starens tid*, Bannerhed elaborates on the cuckoo's role in Swedish culture, pointing out that its return is still celebrated with a morning service in May in some parts of Sweden (72). Ushering in the spring, cuckoos are associated with "sun and budding greenery,"¹⁰ though they also carry ominous, supernatural associations, having the ability to foretell not only the weather and the harvest, but also how long a child will live, when a farmer will die, and the circumstances of a maiden's future marriage (73). A newborn cuckoo is a prime image of voraciousness, quick to kill its foster siblings, soon outgrowing its foster parents. Raised by other species, in whose nests it will in turn lay its eggs, and rarely interacting with its own kind except for mating purposes, the cuckoo's life is an existential mystery (74, 77): "how does the cuckoo know that it is a cuckoo?" (74).¹¹ Aside from his feeling like a parasite, Klas's identification with the cuckoo can thereby be linked to a quest for identity.

Trees such as rowan, aspen and alder are present throughout the text, forming part of the backdrop but also functioning as signifiers and at times as forces, if not exactly characters. A *flygrönn*—"flying rowan"—is a rowan that grows from the fork of another tree, a phenomenon that has been associated with a range of superstitions since at least the Viking age. In *Korparna*, the dowser ("slagrutemannen"), Alvar, goes searching for one to make a divining rod. Veronika and her family are in the process of moving in, and Alvar has been given the task of trying to locate a well on their property up at Lyckanshöjd. He laments that flying rowans are hard to come by these days, as people no longer keep track of them (*Korparna* 67–68), yet another example of a form of traditional knowledge that has almost been lost. Scientifically, dowsing doesn't work, and flying rowans are just rowans.

Today, biodiversity is mapped in more detail than ever, but the information is stored in databases rather than in collective memory, based on specialist, or at least citizen scientist, knowledge, rather than that of local communities. One of the most striking aspects of *Korparna* is that it draws on both science and folk tradition without pitting these knowledge systems against each other. While tacitly assuming that his readers will be able to distinguish the scientific from the folkloric, Bannerhed adheres

⁸ Bannerhed does not mention it, but in the folk tradition of Småland, one should avoid imitating the cuckoo's call, as this could excite the bird to spit blood (Karl Salomonsson cited in Svanberg 56–57).

⁹ "Inte mycket att fira en som lever på andra" (*Korparna* 83).

¹⁰ "sol och spirande grönska" (*I starens tid* 73).

¹¹ "hur vet göken att den är gök?" (*I starens tid* 74). Also see *Korparna* 313.

to standards of scientific accuracy in his descriptions of birds and plants; yet he also allows room for myth and superstition, recognizing the fascination they continue to hold and acknowledging their place in the cultural imaginary.

Flying rowans take root when birds eat rowan berries and excrete the seeds up in trees; they are therefore associated with birds, and, considering that they are not rooted in the ground like other trees, also with flight. Alvar says that the flying rowan was “Frigg’s tree”—referring to the goddess, the protector of mothers, in Norse mythology—and that providing a house with water found with a flying rowan will lead to fertility and protection from harm for those who live there, as the home will then become a holy place (*Korparna* 69). However, he also refers to the mythological first woman on Earth, Embla, and claims that she was created from a rowan (69), leading the reader to doubt his narrative, as this contradicts the well-known theory that Embla originated from an elm.¹² It is clear that the anecdotes Bannerhed refers to need not be taken literally, that some of them have been playfully embroidered upon. Alvar’s warning that “[p]utting a flying rowan in a jar is like burying a raven alive,”¹³ and that such a deed will not go unpunished (69), can lead us to think of flying rowans as a wild and unmanageable force that is not meant to be cultivated. Late in the novel there is a disturbing scene where Agne tries to get his family to eat rowan berries. His wife Gärd—accompanied by Klas and his younger brother Göran—has just picked him up at the hospital where he recovered from his collapse, and driving back home, they stop for a break. When Agne wanders off, his wife and sons fear he has lost his mind again and eventually find him proffering a fistful of the bitter berries, which he urges them to eat (270–71).

Another folkloric motif that plays a significant role in *Korparna* is that of the *lindorm*,¹⁴ a mythological serpent or dragon that purportedly preys on livestock and feeds on human corpses. It appears in legends from various parts of Northern and Western Europe, but holds a special place in Småland, where alleged sightings of giant snakes—up to at least three meters long, sometimes with a horse-like mane—were reported as late as 1885. Gunnar Olof Hyltén-Cavallius, a scholar from Småland, collected eyewitness reports of the feared creature, and offered a reward to anyone who managed to collect a specimen. Stories circulated of men who had fought and killed particularly aggressive individuals, and when no specimen was ever collected, this was said to be because *lindorm* carcasses decay exceptionally fast and exude an unbearable stench that can lead to serious illness (Meurger 87–88).

Hyltén-Cavallius introduces his treatise on the *lindorm* by referring to the dragons or serpents of Norse mythology (3), the most iconic of which is Jörmungandr, the Midgard Serpent, which encircles Midgard with the length of its body, holding the world together. When it loosens its grip, however, chaos and destruction will ensue; it provides security, while also carrying the threat that that security might be lost. The

¹² See for instance Nedkvitne and Gjerdåker 162.

¹³ “Sätta en flygrönn i krukka är som att begrava korpen levande” (*Korparna* 69).

¹⁴ While the Swedish *lind* means “snake” but can also refer to the linden trees (*Tilia* sp.), *orm* can mean either “snake,” “dragon” or “worm.”

Midgard Serpent is pursued by Thor, god of lightning and thunder, and during Ragnarök, the two will do battle and slay each other. In *Korparna*, this is echoed in the way that the lindorm has the ability to attract and swallow lightning.

Bannerhed also links the *lindorm* to the linden tree. When Gärd, Klas and Göran take shelter in the car during a thunderstorm, Gärd tells them a story about an old linden tree by her mother's parents' home which they called "the thunder-linden" ("Åsklinden") because it had blocked a ball lightning from striking the house. This was due to the *lindorm* that lived "down between the roots" and "drew the lightning strikes down into the earth and swallowed them" (197).¹⁵

In Hyltén-Cavallius's account, a *lindorm* is "thick as a man's thigh" (4),¹⁶ and in *Korparna*, Bannerhed reveals his source, embroidering on it, when he has Gärd say that the *lindorm* "was seven meters long and as thick as my thigh" (197).¹⁷ It would attack its enemies with a venomous sting, Gärd tells the boys, but could also bite its own tail and roll off "like a great wheel" (198).¹⁸ Again, this is clearly based on the attestations collected by Hyltén-Cavallius, where the "Lindorm" or "Drake" (Swedish for "dragon") is also known as "Hjulorm," "wheel-snake" (6).¹⁹

The image of a snake biting its tail and rolling like a wheel is suggestive of an ouroboros, a symbol of cyclicity associated with archaic traditions such as alchemy. It can be seen as an embodiment of the turning of the seasons and generational cycles, the "thousand years in Småland" of which Elin Wägner writes, where ages merge into each other as traditions are abandoned only to resurface centuries later, rendering the concept of progress or even linearity problematic (Wägner 20). Applied to *Korparna*, this might be the vicious circle Agne is trapped in, bound by a generational pact that has become a curse for him.

There is no biological basis for stories of the *lindorm*, and none of the characters in *Korparna* really believe in it, but Bannerhed weaves it into the narrative so that it forms part of their experience, if only as a story they relate to. It is a part of their mythos, and even if science has rendered it obsolete, it is characteristic of mythologies that elements may be forgotten or overlooked for considerable stretches of time only to be brought back into the light and interpreted in new ways. Michel Meurger has pointed out that when Hyltén-Cavallius set about documenting the existence of the *lindorm*, in the hope that his findings would be recognized by the scientific community, his motivation was not primarily biological, but cultural. Since serpents or dragons in various forms feature prominently in Old Norse iconography and in medieval folklore, proving the veracity of the tales of the *lindorm* could have

¹⁵ "nere bland rötterna. [...] Den drog ner blixterna i jorden och svalde dem om de slog ner i närheten" (*Korparna* 197). This is consistent with one of the eyewitness accounts Hyltén-Cavallius collected, where the *lindorm* is found near a large hole at the foot of an old linden tree (22–23).

¹⁶ "tjock som ett mans-lår" (Hyltén-Cavallius 4). This detail of its girth being comparable to that of a man's thigh is confirmed by many of the eyewitness reports (6, 13, 14, 27, 30, 31, 34, 42).

¹⁷ "Den var sju meter lång och lika grov som mitt lå" (*Korparna* 197).

¹⁸ "som ett stort hjul" (*Korparna* 198).

¹⁹ In one of the eyewitness reports, the belief that it could roll like a wheel is dismissed as superstition (Hyltén-Cavallius 29).

provided a “natural bond with the past,” functioning as evidence of cultural continuity while exonerating the people of Småland, proving “the validity of an antique way of life, now confined within the bounds of a parochial enclave” (Meurger 96).

Korparna is not a celebration of Småland, but it is an attempt at doing justice to the place. Bannerhed depicts its natural beauty and the richness of its history, and despite Agne’s madness and the pervasive air of pettiness, the community is above all characterized by stability. Bannerhed’s portrayal is ambiguous but finely balanced, allowing readers to draw their own conclusions. Though the landscape has been drained and ditched, it has also been a place of flying rowans and has been seen as the last redoubt of the legendary *lindorm*.

Lightning is a recurrent motif in *Korparna*. Alvar has warned Klas that lightning tends to strike old oak trees because their deep roots “seek the groundwater”; this gives them a higher conductivity than “all other trees,” causing them to attract lightning “like a magnet.”²⁰ If one is struggling to detect water with a dowsing rod, one can supposedly go to an oak and start from there, where the source is (*Korparna* 69). Again, there is an implicit reference to Norse mythology, where oaks were associated with Thor.²¹ It is unclear whether Alvar is reciting ancient wisdom or just making up stories (70), but later, during the storm that drives Gärd and the boys to seek safety in the car, “the Crown Oak” (“Kroneken”) at Undantaget does get struck by lightning, and two heifers that have taken shelter beneath it are killed, one of them pregnant, the other the best of their milk cows (204).

The references to lightning are too numerous to dismiss as incidental, yet their significance is not explained, apart from lightning being a source of fear, especially for Klas. Though it can be linked to mythology and folklore, it mostly functions as a representation of the primal forces of nature, of the elements. While the land and the animals are managed by humans, lightning is beyond their control, a dangerous, unpredictable, awe-inspiring force. As one never knows exactly where it is going to strike, it is a reminder that there is no such thing as total security.

Klas is camping in the woods at night when a storm takes him by surprise, rain and wind tearing at his tent. He imagines that the bog is finally about to split open and reclaim the farms and the forest (*Korparna* 321), or that perhaps the *lindorm* has “awoken to life”²² and emerged to watch the lightning flashing one last time (322). Impulsively, in defiance of all good sense, he proceeds to pick a bunch of fly agaric, chopping the poisonous mushrooms up and mixing them with some cold pine needle tea, which he proceeds to drink in little gulps (324). He makes himself sick, punishes himself for never lending a hand, for being “cuckoo-like,” a “meaningless creep”;²³ he pushes himself to the limit in order to be purged of all this uselessness (327). It appears to be a catharsis of sorts, a way of proving to himself what he is willing to

²⁰ “ekrötterna går djupt, söker sig till grundvattnet, vilket gör att eken leder elektricitet bättre än alla andra träd. Den drar till sig blixten som en magnet” (*Korparna* 69).

²¹ Though Bannerhed does not mention Thor in connection with oaks, he refers to Thor’s role as the bringer of thunder and lightning elsewhere in *Korparna* (406).

²² “vaknat till liv” (*Korparna* 322).

²³ “gökaktigt”; “meningslösa kryp” (*Korparna* 327).

risk, how far he is willing to go, in the hope that things can get better. Then again, such reckless, manic behavior also suggests that Klas might be susceptible to the same kind of delusions that plague his father.

Cultural Heritage and Biodiversity

Though some of the traditional notions about trees and birds presented in *Korparna* are suggestive of a pagan past, the Swedish farming community Bannerhed writes about is deeply embedded in Christian, capitalist and even industrial systems of thought. As in other parts of Scandinavia, wetlands in Småland were drained with ditches during the nineteenth century. By 1875, it was reported that the fens and bogs in eastern parts of Småland had been replaced by farmland, the forests gone, while several bird species that were once abundant had all disappeared (Svanberg 15). The farming tradition Agne represents is by no means a pastoral idyll; on the contrary, it has long been dominated by an economic drive toward industrialized agriculture.

On one level, Agne is engaged in a futile struggle against the changing times, yet on another, he is wholly reliant on the destructive technologies of agroindustry, which he does not seem to question. DDT had already been banned in 1970, after causing severe declines in populations of predatory birds such as peregrine falcon. Agne, however, wears a cap with the brand name “Hormoslyr” printed on the sides (*Korparna* 180), functioning as a walking advertisement for another chemical—a herbicide whose main active ingredients are the same as those of Agent Orange—which would be banned in Sweden in 1977, as it was found to cause cancer and birth defects. In their different ways, Klas and Agne are both entangled in conflicts not only between tradition and science but also between traditional and industrial agriculture. *Korparna* reveals contradictions and paradoxes that result in friction between generations; at times, this comes across as nostalgia for what has been, but tradition is also revealed to be inadequate, necessitating changes in both agricultural and lifestyle practices.

Today, old stone fences around fields might strike us as scenic features of a time-worn cultural heritage landscape, but Agne is preoccupied with what a backbreaking task it was to remove the stones from the ground with a spade and digging bar, pointing out that his grandfather was unable to finish the task even though he was hard at it all his life (*Korparna* 184). He calls it “slave labor” (“slavgöra”) and finds a cruel irony in the fact that people now tend to think that the stones are there for aesthetic purposes (185). Ranting on, he compares it to war, says that it was about survival back then (185); he never tires of emphasizing that the farm they live on is the result of generations of toil. Decades of hard labor have almost destroyed him, have worn him out physically and left him with severe psychological problems.

Agne doesn't want to talk about it, at least not in front of Klas, but during a quarrel, Gärd lets slip that his grandfather, Klas's great-grandfather, drowned himself when Agne was a young boy (*Korparna* 186). Agne's father, on the other hand, was

dragged away to a nursing home against his will and died there (373). “There was no one that could handle a scythe like father,” says Agne (188), and tells Klas all about the techniques his own father used for cutting the grass and sharpening the scythe (189). The story repeats itself, as Klas and Agne appear to be replaying scenes that once played out between Agne and his father. In the library, a retired schoolteacher tells Klas that Agne, in his youth, was bookish and promising, that he could have gone far but had problems at home (95). We understand that Agne is bitter because he had to take over the burden of his father’s responsibilities at a young age, and that he is desperate to justify his path in life, to himself and to his son. Meanwhile, Gärd is a source of stability, a levelheaded counterweight to the darkness and obsession that have taken hold of Agne.

Bearing in mind that the reader’s impression of Agne is filtered through Klas’s gaze, we might do well to treat it with skepticism. Yet, if anything, Klas’s reading of Agne’s moods and behavior is more generous than an outside observer’s would likely be. Through Klas’s observations of Agne’s actions and gestures, we perceive that Agne is obsessive and distracted, at times shockingly inconsiderate, so self-absorbed that he seems to have lost the capacity for empathy. Nevertheless, throughout the novel, Klas’s gut reaction is to hold out hope that Agne will pull through, that he is not as crazy as some of the villagers would have him. When Klas finds the text “AGNE HEADED FOR THE MADHOUSE”²⁴ spray-painted in large, bold letters across the wall of the morgue by the church, his immediate reaction is one of denial, before he tries to surmise who might have done it and makes plans to remove it (*Korparna* 131–33).

Through the novel, crisis follows crisis, building up to a seemingly inevitable turning point. When Agne finally commits suicide by drowning, it is hardly a surprise (*Korparna* 409–14). The Canal (“Kanalen”), along with the danger of falling into it, is introduced as a motif at the very beginning of the novel (*Korparna* 7, 9), so when Klas receives a phone call from Alvar about having found Agne’s cap down by the Canal (409), he rushes down to investigate while the realization of what has happened sinks in. Along the way, he is accosted by a “swarm” (“svärm”) of lapwings, screaming and scolding, whisking through the air around Klas’s head with their dark, scythe-like wings like “messengers from death itself”²⁵ warning him to turn back (410).

Readers familiar with northern lapwings will realize that they are probably defending their nests, but it is fitting that lapwings would warn of Agne’s death as they represent the way of life that dies with him: a farming tradition, a certain way of reading the landscape. They are at home in these damp, low-lying fields, characteristic of the environment Agne was emplaced in. Lapwings have in recent years come to be seen as emblematic of traditional Scandinavian cultural landscapes, but are also in sharp decline due to habitat loss as a result of industrialized agriculture. “Näiii, näiii!” they wail, almost a “no,” a bleating, insistent cry of denial (*Korparna* 410). Whether Undantaget is incorporated into a larger, industrial-scale farm, or whether it is left

²⁴ “AGNE PÅ VÄG TILL DÅRHUSET” (*Korparna* 131).

²⁵ “varnande sändebud från döden själv” (*Korparna* 410).

untended and reverts to thicket and shrub, the lapwings are likely to disappear along with their habitat. It is unclear what Klas will decide, but if he does end up trying to keep the farm running, chances are that he will do it out of concern for the lapwings and other species that thrive in tended landscapes. In a world of monocultures bisected by highways, the cry of a lapwing can appear as archaic and nostalgic, but also as a warning, an alarm call, alerting us to the loss of biodiversity.

Conclusion: Emplacement and Environmental Identity

On some levels, *Korparna* is an easy read, a story of different generations, of a young boy who is reluctant to take on the burden of toil his father has carried, while there are also the beginnings of a love story. Some readers might flip quickly past the ornithological and botanical details, but if one stops to consider the themes and context, these details are instructive elaborations on various aspects of Småland's culture and environment. Those familiar with Småland might find it particularly interesting, but even for locals some of the references are likely to be obscure.

As mentioned in the introduction, emplacement relates to ecology, aesthetics, resources and community, all of which contribute toward shaping our relations to nature (Clingerman 23). While the ornithological science Klas draws on in his interpretation of local birdlife would hold limited interest without the aesthetic dimension, traditional folk beliefs deepen his understanding of the birds' cultural significance. These folk beliefs, along with common knowledge about local flora and fauna, would once have played a significant role in cultural practices, for instance with the communal celebration of the cuckoo's return. Today, environmentalism and natural historical enthusiasm have the potential to play a comparable cultural role but can be divisive when they come into conflict with resource use. The resource perspective is at odds with the ecological perspective in that birds—serving as ecological indicators—are threatened by industrial agriculture. The place is still relatively rich in birdlife, but would have been richer in times past, and large birds of prey, such as the white-tailed eagles Klas models his kite on, are conspicuous by their absence.

In concert with Clingerman's concept of emplacement, John van Buren's critical environmental hermeneutics provides a means of explicating the environmental perspectives expressed in *Korparna*. Seeking to disentangle the "underlying epistemological, ethical, and political issues" that come into play in different environmental interpretations (261–62), van Buren sketches out four criteria for interpretation—biophysical, technical, historical and ethical-political (268)—which allow us to distinguish between the objective and the relative in order to achieve a balance between them (273). In this light, we might say that the objective characteristics of Undantaget are that it consists of low-lying land that has been drained and converted from marsh to farmland, and that it is home to a variety of plants, birds and mammals. What is at stake in our interpretation of it, however, relates to its relative characteristics: for Agne it is valuable because of the food it can

produce, and he sees its cultivation as a prime intergenerational goal that affirms the narrative bequeathed to him. For Klas, on the other hand, it is valuable for its biodiversity, while the drudgery of cultivation is abhorrent—not only boring and unhealthy but harmful to the environment. Hence, there is a clash of values at play that cannot be solved with simple reference to scientific or historical fact.

During the nineteenth century, and well into the twentieth, Scandinavian farmers were engaged in a battle against nature, striving for control, for assurance of security. Today, food scarcity is not a major issue for most people in Scandinavia, but increasing numbers of people are worried about extinction and ecological degradation. Concurrently, the “war” Agne still appears to be living in has given way to a kind of nostalgia in the space that has been left behind as this war has become unnecessary. Tradition forms the frame of reference against which new understandings of nature, and humans’ place in it, are renegotiated or reconstructed, and as traditional knowledge is superseded by science, this can evoke nostalgia among those who remain rooted in tradition.

Agne’s values can hence be linked to a struggle to rise out of poverty, while Klas’s can be linked to environmentalism and a more individualistic social context characterized by upward mobility. In his youth, Agne would watch the trains go by and collect old tickets and timetables down by the station (*Korparna* 81); he obviously dreamed of getting away, but over the years, he changed. One of the reasons why it is an overriding concern for Agne that his son should take over the farm is that he himself has had to make enormous sacrifices and now fears that it will all come to naught. As for Klas, even though he readily absorbs new knowledge, recognizing undreamt-of possibilities, he is firmly emplaced, with deep local knowledge and correspondingly strong local attachments. At the novel’s ending, after Agne’s suicide, it remains unclear whether or not Klas will finally break the circle, but it is implicit that his internal struggle will continue, that his task will be one of balance and compromise, trying to honor Agne’s life’s work without letting go of the opportunities available to him, opportunities that Agne too would probably have taken had he been in Klas’s place.

Perhaps Klas’s environmental identity can be considered ecocentric, Agne’s anthropocentric, but it is misleading to think of these as polar opposites.²⁶ Rather than pitting them against each other, we might achieve a fuller understanding if we consider how relations with nonhumans are essential to both. Klas might draw inspiration from ecocentric perspectives, but he is neither willing nor able to disentangle himself fully from the culture he is embedded in; on the contrary, he clings to a desperate hope that the environmentalist ideas that resonate with him can somehow be reconciled with the tradition represented by his father. Agne’s measured folk wisdom may appear antithetical to Klas’s naturalist enthusiasm, but even though Agne is more concerned with nonhumans’ utility to humans, this does not necessarily

²⁶ See for instance Utsler 174.

entail a denial of their intrinsic value. On the contrary, he takes them for granted as integral constituents of the place where he has always lived.

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