



INTERDISCIPLINARY JOURNAL OF DECADENCE STUDIES

Volume 9, Issue 1

Summer 2026

Spiritual Naturalism in A. H. Tammsaare's *Kõrboja peremees*

Mirjam Hinrikus and Riikka Rossi

ISSN: 2515-0073

Date of Acceptance: 1 May 2026

Date of Publication: 22 July 2026

Citation: Mirjam Hinrikus and Riikka Rossi, 'Spiritual Naturalism in A. H. Tammsaare's *Kõrboja peremees*', *Volupté: Interdisciplinary Journal of Decadence Studies*, 9.1 (2026), pp. 1-26.

volupte.gold.ac.uk



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.

Goldsmiths
UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

Spiritual Naturalism in A. H. Tammsaare's *Kõrboja peremees*¹

Mirjam Hinrikus and Riikka Rossi

Tallinn University and University of Helsinki

In art, I love realism to the point of the fantastic. [...] What could be more fantastic and unexpected for me than reality?

– Fyodor Dostoevsky²

When A. H. Tammsaare (1878–1940)³ completed *Kõrboja peremees* [The Master of Kõrboja] (1922), Estonia's most canonized author was forty-four years old and had already enjoyed a literary career spanning nearly two decades. Frequently hailed as his first truly mature work, *Kõrboja peremees* is regarded as the novel in which Tammsaare discovered his authentic voice.⁴ Set in a distinctly Estonian rural landscape, the novel is often described as rooted in the realistic or naturalist tradition and saturated with (national) symbolism. Furthermore, this so-called authentic voice has also been described as lyrical, poetic, mystical, irrational, and decadent⁵ – qualities that challenge the conventions of the naturalist novel and its realistic representation.⁶

At the centre of *Kõrboja peremees* lies a strange love story between the heirs of two rival farms, Villu and Anna. Their intense attraction is shaped by an unresolved past, ancestral rivalry, and the commitment to the land, unfolding a cycle of passion and destruction which ends in Villu's suicide. The power relationships and emotional turmoil – love, hatred, shame, guilt, and alienation – align Tammsaare's narrative with the fin-de-siècle sensibility and more precisely the aesthetics of literary decadence. While the agrarian setting and peasant characters evoke the traditions of realism and naturalism,⁷ Tammsaare's narrative moves from external and ordinary realities to explore inner conflicts of the characters and uncanny fatality that escapes rational explanation. Although *Kõrboja peremees* is set in a recognizable historical moment – shortly after the First World War, Estonian War of Independence (1918-1920) and the early years of the first Republic of Estonia (1918-1940, see the final sub-chapter) – its treatment of time, space, and causality resists realist transparency. The linear progression of time is disrupted by contradictory narratives of the past and narrative

gaps which complicate the understanding of the present moment. The novel has often been praised for its artistic composition, which reflects the result of the author's long and deliberate intellectual effort.

The tension between the realistic frames of the novel and its lyrical, philosophical undercurrents makes *Kõrboja peremees* a compelling case study in the transformation of Estonian prose of early twentieth-century literature. In this article, we examine how Tammsaare's novel at the same time consolidates and undermines the conventions of realism and naturalism by seeking a spiritual dimension beyond the visible, material world. We situate the novel in relation to the aesthetics of decadent fiction, particularly in its preoccupations with poetics of ambivalence and transgression. Central to our analysis is the concept of spiritual naturalism – a paradoxical term that captures the novel's fusion of realism with a metaphysical, even mystical, sensibility. Originating among French decadents in the late nineteenth century, the notion of *spiritual naturalism* emerged as a critical response to the deterministic rationalism and empirical aesthetics of naturalist literature. First coined by J.-K. Huysmans in *Là-bas* (1891), the term was used to describe a revolt against materialist realism in favour of a deeper, i.e., more psychologically complex, and often even mystical understanding of reality.⁸ Authors such as Joris-Karl Huysmans, Walter Pater, Maurice Maeterlinck, Thomas Mann, and August Strindberg articulated an alternative aesthetic: one that sought transcendent truths beneath the surface of everyday life, drawing on mysticism, religion, and occultism.⁹ In contrast to the scientific worldview of the time, spiritual naturalism fostered sensitivity to unseen forces, metaphysical experience, and psychological complexity.

In the early twentieth century, this sensibility began to resonate with Nordic writers and artists. The Finnish critic and poet Kasimir Leino was among the earliest proponents of what might be called a 'synthetic' style in Finland. His article 'Naturalism and Spiritualism in Literature' in *Päivälehti* (1890), written during his trip to Paris, implicitly aligns his thought with the French pioneers of spiritual naturalism.¹⁰ In Estonia, Friedebert Tuglas emerged as a key figure articulating a similar vision. During the second decade of the twentieth century, he began to argue for a

‘spiritualized’ or ‘noble’ naturalism as part of his call for a future synthetic literature.¹¹ Although Tammsaare never explicitly used the term ‘spiritual naturalism’, his early short stories and essays already demonstrate both a command of naturalist techniques and a critical distance from them. By the time of the third *Noor-Eesti* [Young Estonia] album in 1909, he was articulating a synthetic position close to what Tuglas and others had described. In essays from the early 1900s, he critiques the limitations of realism, romanticism, and naturalism, advocating instead a hybrid aesthetic. As he wrote in 1914:

Tahaksime ilu, mis mitte armsaks ja haledaks ei tee, vaid mis tunda laseb: minus on algamine ja ots; minus on elu ja surm; [...] minu kaudu saad sa sünnitajaks, loojaks. Nõnda mõistaksime, kuidas haldjad võisid eksitada ja näkid uputada. Nõnda märkaksime, et meil rabas on palju mände ja hiites oli kord tusedaid tammesid, püsides veel meie päevini.

[We long for a kind of beauty that does not merely make us tender or sentimental, but that allows us to feel: within me is the beginning and the end; within me is life and death; [...] through me you become a begetter, a creator. Thus we would understand how fairies could lead astray, and water-nymphs could drown. Thus we would notice that in our bogs there are still many pines, and that our sacred groves once had mighty oaks, which have endured into our time.]¹²

This yearning for spiritually charged beauty and an intense tonality, where contrasting emotions and affects intertwine, marks a shift away from materialist naturalism toward a poetics that embraces the mythic and the invisible. In essays from the first decade of the twentieth century, Tammsaare is already reflecting on naturalism’s limitations – notably, its inability to capture the complexity and unpredictability of the human psyche. His early stories (the so-called university novellas, 1908–1910; 1917) often combine naturalist observation with decadent stylization, revealing his resistance to the limitations of both currents. Influenced by European authors such as Émile Zola, Gustave Flaubert, French and Belgian symbolists and Nordic decadents, Tammsaare saw literary naturalism as necessary but incomplete.¹³ In the first decade of the twentieth century, he offers an increasingly explicit critique of the determinism and moral cynicism of realism, observing that ‘tormatakse katsetades igasse serva’ [there is a headlong rush to experiment in every possible direction] yet one becomes lost in the chaos of a transitional age.¹⁴

The theorist and writer who exerted a significant influence on Tammsaare and on many of his contemporaries – alongside Fyodor Dostoevsky and the French and Scandinavian authors mentioned above – was undoubtedly Friedrich Nietzsche. In works published shortly before *Kõrboja peremees*, there are clear indications that Tammsaare was particularly influenced by Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy* and *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Yet, when considered in the context of Tammsaare's entire body of work, it can be argued that he was already deeply familiar with Nietzsche's thought by the early twentieth century.¹⁵ For this reason, *Kõrboja peremees* also refers to Nietzsche's texts at several points; however, compared to some of Tammsaare's earlier works of fiction, the novel contains fewer explicit references. Rather, Nietzschean allusions tend to merge with other ideas central to the fin-de-siècle intellectual context. Nevertheless, the manner in which Tammsaare's narrative challenges the nineteenth-century realist epistemology of truth and objectivity operates largely in Nietzschean terms.

This, in turn, means that rather than positing a unified and transparent subject capable of objective knowledge, the novel foregrounds a conception of subjectivity that resonates with Nietzsche's understanding of the self as a dynamic constellation of competing affects, drives, and impulses.¹⁶ In this sense, the narrative aligns with Nietzsche's critique of metaphysical subjectivity and his rejection of truth as correspondence. Furthermore, Tammsaare's perspectival narrative structure parallels Nietzsche's doctrine of perspectivism, according to which knowledge is always situated, interpretive, and dependent on particular standpoints rather than grounded in a single, objective viewpoint.¹⁷

This kind of epistemological stance also underpins the novel's logic of style. Drawing on the aesthetics of ambivalence associated with decadent literature,¹⁸ we argue that *Kõrboja peremees* is structured around a network of dynamic tensions and paradoxes that operate across narrative, symbolic, and philosophical levels. Anna and Villu, the novel's central figures, are presented as internally conflicted, deeply ambivalent subjects, whose motivations resist full psychological transparency. Their relationship is represented as a fatal and tormented love typical of decadent

literature charged with negative emotions, obsessions, and an interplay of power. Moreover, the use of oxymoronic imagery – already suggestively articulated in phrases such as ‘within me is the beginning and the end; within me is life and death’ from the 1914 article cited above – contributes to a broader tendency toward spiritual expression. In particular, the novel’s stylistic features cultivate a spiritual mood characterized by fusion and transcendence. Features such as repetitions enhance the emotional intensity of scenes in which an ecstatic-manic and Dionysian atmosphere dominates, imitating a dissolution of boundaries between self and world that is characteristic of the emotion of ecstasy that is typical for mystic poetry and religious experiences.¹⁹

Finally, this article examines how Tammsaare’s ‘spiritual naturalism’ negotiates the ambivalent relationship between decadence, national culture, and nationalism. While *Kõrboja peremees* partially distances itself from historical realities through symbolism and a turn toward spirituality, it nonetheless reflects the turbulence of modernization, which in the Estonian, Finnish, and more broadly Nordic context, was marked by a rapid transition from rural to urban culture.²⁰ The novel addresses the challenges of modernity not only through its portrayal of characters living in a society in transition, but also through its aesthetic composition, which integrates European philosophical currents and the metropolitan repertoire of decadence into an agrarian setting. In this sense, the transition to modernity manifests itself both in the novel’s thematic concerns and in its formal and stylistic strategies.

Transitions to decadence

In *Kõrboja peremees*, the narrative unfolds over a relatively short time span, centring on the reunion of Anna and Villu during one summer, approximately ten years after their youth. Anna is around twenty-five years old and Villu twenty-seven. The novel consists of twenty-three chapters of roughly equal length, in which the story is structured through temporal shifts that move both forward and backward in time. Villu, the restless heir to the Katku farm, returns home after serving a prison sentence for killing a man during a fight. Known as a drunkard, sexually attractive, and a

passionate brawler, he has shown little interest in agricultural work and has previously attempted to acquire wealth through peddling and the illegal distillation of spirits. His past is further complicated by the illegitimate child he fathered with Eevi, a former servant at the Kõrboja farm.

Villu can be read as a Nietzschean decadent figure, embodying the fin-de-siècle reception of Nietzschean philosophy and reflecting the Dionysian²¹ male anti-hero characteristic of decadent aesthetics – an individualistic and rebellious force driven by instinct, passion, and an intensified relation to nature.²² In the first chapter, it is suggested that Villu is driven by ‘miski nimetu’ [something unnamed],²³ which may be read as an allusion to his strong sexual drive and, more broadly, to its Nietzschean-Dionysian nature. His sexuality is closely linked to his creative energies, manifested above all in his impulse to shape both himself and his surroundings, most strikingly through his determination to clear his ancestral land of stones and transform it into fertile ground.²⁴

Villu’s rebellious spirit and existential struggle, closely tied to his attachment to Kivimägi [Stone hill],²⁵ thus align with Nietzsche’s vision of the individual – often figured as the decadent artist – who pursues authenticity even at the risk of self-destructive behaviour.²⁶ A skilled hunter and tracker, Villu is profoundly attuned to the natural world, reading traces left by animals, birds, and even humans, a sensitivity memorably captured in the opening scene in which he discovers Anna’s footprints by the lake.

Anna, by contrast, is introduced as a cultivated and emancipated ‘New Woman’ from the wealthier Kõrboja manor. In her youth, she studied in the city, that is, in St. Petersburg. She has now returned home at her ageing father’s request to assume responsibility for managing the estate. Her urban education and experience stand in marked contrast to Villu’s restlessness and rebellious disposition. As the narrator notes, she had attended school in the city from early childhood and later ‘mõni teab missuguseid suuri saksu teenis’ [served some great lords, who knows what kind].²⁷ A distinct economic difference exists between Villu and Anna. Kõrboja, a well-established estate, is sustained predominantly through hired labour and embodies the social hierarchies and privileges of the wealthier rural people. In contrast, Villu’s family farm, Katku, is impoverished, personified

by Villu, who bears the weight of his family's low social status. The prosperous Kõrboja estate seeks to acquire Katku's land. Despite the economic differences,²⁸ reflecting the internal stratifications of peasant society and psychological divisions, Anna remains fatally drawn to Villu.

Kõrboja peremees thus introduces us to two complex figures whose relationship develops into a web of tension and dependency, reminiscent of ambivalent characters in fin-de-siècle literature rather than the psychology of realism. Their complexity is further deepened by the narrative that gradually unveils their relationship's past. Like many core texts of decadent and modernist fiction,²⁹ Tammsaare's novel undermines unified narration and the linear flow of time, moving toward fragmentation and narrative opacity. The linear progression of time is disrupted by memories that shed new light on tragic love and complicate the tensions of the present moment. Of particular significance is an incident related to their youth in which Villu suffers an injury that ultimately leads to the loss of sight in his right eye. This episode, which is situated in the earliest days of their acquaintance, is recalled and narrated several times from different perspectives, with both Anna and Villu returning to it at various occasions. Each re-narration reframes the episode, introducing layers of ambiguity that complicate its meaning. The scene's dense symbolic texture, together with narrative gaps and indeterminacy about what actually occurred, intensifies epistemological uncertainty and further complicates the interpretation of the novel.

The incident is first introduced through the perspective of Villu's mother in Chapter One. Released from prison, Villu revels in his regained freedom, running with wild abandon toward the forest and the lake. His mother, however, views his restlessness with apprehension, fearing that he 'võiks oma teisegi silma metsas pimedaks joosta' [would run another eye off in the forest].³⁰ In Chapter Two she revisits the matter in conversation, alluding to the event by remarking that Villu had run his eye off.³¹ Villu recalls that while they were picking berries and playing in the forest, Anna had run ahead, seized a thorny branch, bent it back 'nagu vibud' [like a bowstring],³² and then released it so that it struck him in the eye:

Nagu ma mäletan, oli see nõnda, et tema jooksis ees, mina järel, tema kahmas puuokstest kinni, kiskus nad nagu vibud vinna ja laskis nad siis mulle vastu silmi, nõnda oli see. [It happened like this, as I remember it: she ran ahead, I was following, she grabbed the tree branches, pulled them back like the string of a bow, and then let them snap right into my eyes – that's how it was.]³³

Although the reader is informed of Anna's role at this point, Villu himself has never told Anna that it caused the blindness in his right eye, until the novel's conclusion. His mother, who loves her son unconditionally, is aware of Anna's involvement and warns him against her influence: 'Ja kui ma kuulsin, et Anna koju tuleb, ning mõtlesin, et ka sina nüüd vangist lahti saad, siis hakkas mul hirm, öösel nägin teist kahest uneski!' [And when I heard that Anna was coming home, and thought you would be released from prison as well, I became afraid – I even had dreams about the two of you!]³⁴

The event's significance as a site of conflict and violence is further intensified through Anna's perspective. Her memory reveals a different version, one imbued with a deeper, more troubling trauma. The narrative hints that the eye injury was preceded by a sexual encounter against her will, implying that Villu may have raped her. Reflecting on this moment, Anna remembers:

Siis istus ta ja oli kuri, oli vihane, oli kuri häbi pärast, millele ei saanud leida seletust või põhjust. Ta oli seekord nii hirmus vihane häbi pärast, et ta kiristas hambaid, et ta mõtles eluvõtmise peale, mõtles, et ta enam kunagi ei taha näha teda, ega teisi inimesi, teisi mehi.

[Then she sat there, furious, angry, seething with shame – a shame for which she could find no explanation or cause. She was so terribly angry about her shame that she gnashed her teeth and harboured thoughts of suicide; she thought she never wanted to see that man or any other people, any other men ever again.]³⁵

Despite its significance, this reading of the incident – where Anna's intense anger and shame suggest the presence of sexual violence – has been largely neglected in previous scholarship on Tammsaare's novel.³⁶ The interpretation that the memory of the eye injury ties with sexuality gains further support from its intertextuality, which is densely symbolic and draws on biblical references, notably the Book of Genesis and the narrative of the Fall. The forest in which Anna and Villu play during puberty, when they are around ten years younger, becomes an analogue of the Garden of Eden – a space of innocence disrupted by transgression. The allusion to the myth of the Fall is

also indicative of the novel's transition to decadence, as this myth was repeatedly reimagined in decadent literature, particularly through the figures of the *femme fatale* and the 'fallen woman', and was frequently invoked as an allegory for cultural decline – a symbolic fall of humankind.³⁷

The biblical dimension is further developed by another detail from the same episode, disclosed by the narrator later in the novel: Anna is said to have been bitten by a snake,³⁸ and Villu, in an act cast as heroic, saves her life by sucking the venom from her wound. The motif of the serpent elaborates further the myth of Genesis, temptation and fall. Yet later, in the ending of the novel, Anna undermines this heroic narrative by confessing that no snake had bitten her; instead, she had inflicted the wound herself with a thorny branch to test Villu's reaction.³⁹

This revelation illuminates the undercurrent of tension and mutual power play in terms of Nietzsche's *Wille zur Macht* [*Will to Power*]⁴⁰ that defines their relationship. At the same time, it further destabilizes the truth of the episode, reinforcing a symbolic layer of representation that transcends the novel's realist surface. The narratives told from different perspectives challenge ideas of truth and shared reality which characterize the epistemology of traditional realism. Rather than presenting an objective reality, the novel embraces a relativistic framework grounded in Nietzschean perspectivism, which appears in Tammsaare's works among many other Nietzschean ideas. On the one hand, the emphasis is placed on the subjective nature of knowledge and thus on the particularity of individual vantage points.⁴¹ On the other hand, it underscores the fact that knowledge is always laden with emotions and affects, above all through what Nietzsche conceptualizes as the 'Wille zur Macht'.

In this light, Anna and Villu emerge as contrasting yet deeply ambivalent figures, whose relationship evolves into a distorted or tormented love, marked by a peculiar obsession and masochistic dependency reminiscent of characters in decadent literature.⁴² Their encounters are persistently shadowed by memories of violence, including the implied rape, and grotesque injuries, that tie love with suffering, and are even occasionally toned with sadomasochistic pleasure in pain. This aligns *Kõrboja peremees* with a poetics of emotions and affect characteristic of decadence. The

intense and tormented love resonates with what Mario Praz famously termed ‘romantic agony’: a fin-de-siècle aesthetic in which pleasure and pain are inseparably entwined.⁴³ In this tradition, love is bound to death and melancholy; corruption, and decay become integral to beauty.⁴⁴ The emotional effect of this agony is further heightened through a juxtaposition of contrasts, exemplified in Tammsaare’s depiction of the strange attraction between Anna representing an unattainable ideal, and the grotesque, crippled Villu, thereby evoking a tension between the sublime and the Satanic. Such ambivalence pervades the novel’s affective atmosphere, where the sense of tragic merges with fatal mutual attraction. As Praz notes, ‘the more bitter the taste, the more abundant the enjoyment’, encapsulating the decadent paradox of delight found in pain.⁴⁵ This dynamic in Tammsaare’s work is encapsulated by the Finnish-Estonian decadent-modernist author Aino Kallas in her collection of essays⁴⁶ on the authors of Young Estonia, where she observes: ‘Tammsaare armastuses on suur määr pünamishimu, nagu on tähendat, piinategemine kuulub oluliselt ta armastusnaudingusse.’ [In Tammsaare’s conception of love there is a considerable element of a desire to inflict suffering; as has been noted, the production of suffering forms an essential part of his erotic enjoyment.]⁴⁷

Return to myth, effects of ecstasy

Tammsaare’s rendering of Estonian rural life builds a layered reality with references to biblical episodes, folkloric elements, and cyclical, seasonal time.⁴⁸ These allusions constitute an important part of the novel’s spirituality, which suggest a deeper reality beyond ordinary life. A mythic, primordial bond between human beings and nature is reflected in several scenes. When Anna and Villu meet again after the events of their youth, the description of their reunion by the village lake is described as intensely corporeal and emotionally charged though, paradoxically, their bodies never physically touch. When Anna sees Villu leap naked into the water, crying out in ecstatic freedom, their meeting becomes, as Tõnu Õnnepalu observes, ‘*keha*de kohtumine *hing*es, kohtumine ihas, ilma et vahetataks ühtegi sõna, aga ometi nii, nagu oleks kõik juba toimunud, kõik otsustatud

ja kõik räägitud' [a meeting of bodies in spirit and in desire, without a single word exchanged, and yet as if everything had already happened, everything decided and everything said].⁴⁹ The fact that they return to their native village on the exact same day – after years apart and without knowledge of the other's arrival – suggests a kind of fated pattern aligned with natural and spiritual cycles. Symbolically, it is significant that this day coincides with the Feast of the Ascension in the Christian calendar – a day commemorating Christ's ascent to heaven.⁵⁰ Their attraction is portrayed as instinctive force, which, as it is characteristic of mystic experiences, can be grasped by intuition, although it escapes verbal expression.⁵¹

References to spiritual and mythic realities are further developed and intensified in a pivotal scene depicting the Midsummer celebration, which culminates in Villu's second injury. This episode, resulting in the accident in which Villu also loses his left eye, replicates the accident of his youth. The scenery of the injury is charged with emotional intensity and symbolic resonance, as Midsummer in the Nordic tradition signifies not only fertility and the abundance of summer but also rites of transformation. In Nordic decadence, the idyllic motif of Midsummer, is employed in the service of the decadent imagination and in accordance with the ambiguous poetics of decadence and its move towards transgression.⁵² The decadent potential of the mystical Nordic summer night (the nightless night, a paradox itself) was employed by many authors and artists of the Nordic fin de siècle: from August Strindberg's *Fröken Julie* [*Miss Julie*] (1888), to Anders Zorn's midsummer paintings, or to Knut Hamsun's novels.⁵³ In a way, the summer night encapsulates a central aspect of Nordic decadence: it frequently combines a spirit of transgression stemming from nature imagined as an abode of primitive instincts and simultaneously creates a melancholic sense of vanishing beauty. The contrasting dimensions of Midsummer are elaborated in *Kõrboja peremees*, where the idyllic celebration devolves into violence and tragedy. The narration gradually intensifies the emotional tension leading up to the accident, through the portrayal of the Midsummer dances – a scene charged with heightened affective intensity. Tammsaare amplifies the drama through the

passion of dance in terms of Nietzschean Dionysian decadence and celebration,⁵⁴ especially by describing Villu's intoxication and increasingly wild dance with Anna. He writes:

Villu keerutas nüüd Kõrboja perenaist ennastki tema toodud laternate ja kirevate tulede ringis, keerutas teda teist kordagi, keerutas, nagu polnud teda täna õhtul veel keegi keerutanud. Villu sai hoosse, Villul tõusis tuju, Villusse hakkas hull uimastus, nii et ta tantsis, hüppas ja trampis nagu meeletu. Ei ta hoolinud teistest, ei ta hoolinud enam suurt sellestki, kellega ta tantsis, ta tantsis ainult ja kriiskas vahetevahel, nagu oleks ta mõni metslane, kes kuulutab tantsul oma sõjakisa, oma võitlushimu. Villu tantsis pillimehe väsinuks, Villu tantsis tantsumuru lagedaks, sest Villut kardeti, kui ta nõnda tantsis.

[Now Villu was spinning the mistress of Kõrboja herself beneath the lanterns and coloured lights she had brought – spinning her as no one else had done that evening. Villu gained momentum, Villu's spirits rose, and a mad intoxication seized Villu, so that he danced, jumped, and stomped like a lunatic. He didn't care for the others, nor did he much care who he danced with; he just danced and occasionally shouted as if he were some wild man, proclaiming a war cry, a battle cry with his dance. Villu danced until the musician was exhausted, Villu danced the lawn bare, for Villu was feared when he danced like this.]⁵⁵

Here, Villu's dance develops into an ecstatic transformation, reflecting similar scenes in Tammsaare's other works. A certain Dionysian atmosphere is created, in which the intoxicating, drowsy-erotic and ecstatic-manic instincts merge. Moreover, the description reflects the dual nature of ecstasy – *ek-stasis*, or standing outside oneself, and its Janus-faced nature. Ecstasy fuses the boundaries between self and world. It may offer renewal and transcendence or, alternatively, a descent into chaos, confusion, and the breakdown of agency, or disintegration and madness.⁵⁶

Interestingly, Tammsaare's musical style,⁵⁷ closely aligns with this thematic focus. The narration accelerates in rhythm and tone, mirroring Villu's altered state of consciousness. Lexical and syntactic iteration takes over, suspending linear time and anchoring the scene in an intensified present. Such narrative immediacy – looped syntax, rhythmic cadence, and sensory fixation – generates a mantra-like rhythm that holds time rather than advancing the linear progress of narrative.⁵⁸ This fusion of textual rhythm and emotional atmosphere exemplifies the decadent aesthetic, in which excess and sensation override narrative causality. Central to the understanding of this effect is the concept of mood: an emotional tone that pervades the text, encompassing diffuse affective intensities that transcend the boundaries of individual character psychology. As

theorized by Noël Carroll (2003), Sianne Ngai (2005), Marco Caracciolo (2017), and others, mood is not reducible to discrete emotions experienced by characters or readers.⁵⁹ Rather, it emerges through the interplay of narrative form, stylistic choices, and rhythmic structures. While mood is significant across many literary genres or modes of expression, it holds particular importance for the decadent style, which frequently relies on implication and suggestive imagery that transcend realistic language⁶⁰ and resist interpretation, echoing the Freudian unconscious and aiming to evoke effects like those of music. As John R. Reed argues, repetition in decadent literature functions analogously to musical composition, fostering sensibility and suspended anticipation.⁶¹ This type of musicality, along with its sensual and ambiguous effects, constitutes an essential aspect of the dense mood in Tammsaare's writing.

Through this ecstatic crescendo in the Midsummer dance, *Kõrboja peremees* shifts to the tragic accident. Intoxicated and driven by a need to prove himself, Villu attempts to blast rocks in honour of Anna's birthday. Although Villu had previously shown little interest in farming, he has recently begun clearing the land by removing stones that obstruct cultivation. However, this gesture of (Nietzschean-Simmelian) creative strength quickly turns disastrous. The explosion goes off prematurely, severely injuring Villu's right arm and left eye. As in many episodes of the novel, the focalization is deliberately unstable, shifting fluidly between the old Rein (who wakes at the precise moment of the blast), the external narrator, and Anna, whose perspective inflects the scene with emotional immediacy. The narrative's intensity is heightened by the forceful images and by intertextual allusions that link the grotesque accident to both destiny and Fall and to the promise of redemption. The narration refers to the fabricated story that Villu once saved Anna's life by sucking venom from a snakebite – reinforcing the sense of fatality and the idea of an early, blood-sealed bond that now drives her to assist him. Anna tears her skirt to bind Villu's wounds and offers him alcohol to ease his pain: 'Jooge veel, [...] jooge niipalju kui läheb, niipalju kui on.' [Drink more, [...] drink as much as you can, as much as there is.]⁶² This scene can be interpreted as a decadent adaptation of the Gospel narrative of Jesus' baptism by the John the Baptist. Villu is then

taken by horse-drawn cart to the town infirmary for in-patient treatment. After weeks of treatment in the hospital, Villu returns to the countryside as a grotesque, crippled figure, who has now injured both eyes and his hand. His physical capacity and strength – emblems of masculinity within peasant society – are fractured.⁶³ This rupture is conveyed through a destabilized depiction of his altered vision:

Villu ümbrus on selguse kaotanud, jooned on muutunud ähmaseks ja virvendavaks. Igal pool tabab Villu mingisugust vöörast, tüütut virvendust: virvendav järv, virvendavad puud järvekaldal, virvendavad pilved järve kohal, virvendavad järve põhjaski ja kisuvad taevagi kaasa virvendama ...

[Villu's surroundings had lost their clarity; their outlines had become blurred and flickering. Everywhere Villu looked, he encountered a strange, unpleasant shimmer: the lake shimmered, the trees on the shore shimmered, the shimmering clouds above the lake, and even the shimmering depths of the lake, pulling the sky itself into the same shimmering movement.]⁶⁴

Villu's loss of sight is imbued with multilayered symbolism. On one level, it recalls mythic archetypes such as Oedipus or the blind seers of folklore, figures for whom blindness signals an encounter with prophetic wisdom, heightened perception, or the tragic recognition (*anagnorisi*) through which the hero attains self-knowledge and insight into the forces shaping his fate. Yet in Villu's case, this transformation is deeply ambiguous. Within the cultural lexicon of the fin de siècle, vision frequently functioned as spiritual category associated with transcendence and Symbolist idealism.⁶⁵ Rather than leading toward illumination, however, Villu's altered perception draws him increasingly toward transgression and self-destruction, marking not redemption but a deeper entanglement with decadent sensibilities. A more convincing explanation for Villu's blindness may therefore lie in a Nietzschean frame of reference. Nietzsche's perspectivism explicitly links knowledge to vision, insisting that there is no single or objective mode of seeing but only multiple perspectives shaped by affects and interpretative positions.⁶⁶ Once Villu loses his sight, he also loses the capacity to shift between perspectives and to function as the dynamic Nietzschean subject striving toward self-overcoming. Instead of approximating the ideal of the

Übermensch through the interaction of Dionysian and Apollonian forces, Villu gradually assumes the role of a nihilistic decadent figure.

Despite his disfigurement, Anna persistently urges Villu to marry her and assume the role of master at Kõrboja. Villu, however, experiences the proposal as a form of entrapment, emblematic of the mutual power dynamic: ‘aga ei pääse Villu tundmusest, et tema ümber kujutakse mingisugust võrku, et Kõrboja perenaine kujub tema ümber võrku. Milleks? Kui Villu seda teaks!’ [It felt as though some kind of net was being woven around him, that the mistress of Kõrboja was weaving a net around him. For what purpose? If only Villu knew!]⁶⁷ His resistance arises not only from wounded pride but also from a refusal to assume a role that would bind him to the social order he increasingly seeks to transgress. In a gesture characteristic of the decadent hero – whose pursuit of love often unfolds outside the sanctioned institution of marriage⁶⁸ – Villu instead contemplates a continued relationship with Eevi, the mother of his illegitimate child, and a marginal existence on the impoverished Katku farm.

Towards the closure of the novel, the narrative intensifies again during the celebration of the nut crop. This scene culminates in frenzied, ecstatic dancing which echoes the Midsummer scene in both tone and structure. Villu is provoked into drinking and dancing again with primitive force. ‘Villu poolpime silm välgub, Villul välgub pimegi silm’. [Villu’s half-blind eye glimmers – even his blind eye glimmers.]⁶⁹ He implores Anna to join him in the dance; although she initially resists, Villu’s persistence prevails. Their dance, reminiscent of the frenzied energy of the Midsummer celebration, builds to an ecstatic crescendo ending in a grotesque physical collapse. As the floor grows increasingly crowded, the momentum overwhelms the dancers, culminating in Villu falling together with the mistress of Kõrboja – only to be buried beneath the weight of other couples who tumble on top of them. Anna and Villu then leave the dance together and return once again to the lake, the scene which serves a scenery for their intensive dialogues in the novel. The dynamic between them shifts again: Anna, who had earlier resisted Villu’s invitation to dance, now

becomes the one who pleads. She implores him to become the master of Kõrboja.⁷⁰ Villu, however, resigns.

The conclusion of *Kõrboja peremees* encapsulates Villu's Nietzschean spirit of authenticity:⁷¹ by rejecting Anna's proposal and the prescribed role of master at Kõrboja, he chooses suicide as a radical self-determination. Following the nut festival, Villu's suicide is discovered, prompting his father's austere reflection that, though 'Villu ei osanud küll elada, aga surnd on ta kui täismees.' [Villu did not know how to live, his final act was the first act of a real man.]⁷² In this view, Villu's suicide becomes a tragic affirmation of individual will and existential authenticity. This resonates with fin-de-siècle representations of suicide⁷³ as a radical solution to restricted freedom, also echoing Nietzsche's view of suicide, voluntary death as a consolation and transgression against Christian conceptions of death.⁷⁴ Thus, Villu's death stands as an assertion of selfhood against external and social demands. The limits of knowledge implied by Nietzsche's perspectivism are further echoed in Villu's mother's response to her son's suicide: 'Kes teda teab, miks ta enda maha laskis, [...] kes teise sisse näeb' [Who knows why he killed himself – who can truly see inside another].⁷⁵

And yet, within the cyclical temporality that governs *Kõrboja peremees*, Villu's death marks not merely an end but aligns with a mythic rhythm of decline and renewal. In the wake of his suicide, Anna's decision to take in Eevi and raise Villu's illegitimate son as the future master of Kõrboja reorients the narrative from tragedy toward regeneration.⁷⁶ The child, as both a biological heir and a symbolic figure, embodies the possibility of restored order – not only within the farm but also as a broader allegory of the nation. The ending can be read as an allusion to mythic births: the biblical narrative of Christ, and the Finnish national epic *Kalevala*'s myth of Marjatta's son, who is miraculously conceived and ultimately declared the new ruler (eelmine viide). Tammsaare reinforces this intertextual connection through symbolic imagery within the narrator's discourse: 'ta oli Kõrbojale peremehe leidnud punaste marjade keskelt' [The mistress of Kõrboja had found

the master of Kõrboja among the red berries],⁷⁷ echoing both the Virgin Mary and its folkloric variants – for example, Marjatta’s miraculous pregnancy after eating a lingonberry in *Kalevala*.⁷⁸

The mythical layers and the integration of cyclical time also tie *Kõrboja peremees* with ideas of cyclical temporality and history prevalent in the fin-de-siècle philosophy (Taine, Bourget, Nietzsche, Spengler, etc.), which was nourished in turn by the philosophy from the period of Enlightenment and Romanticism (e.g., Humboldt, Herder), and which interpreted Western society, or culture (including art), or language as a bearer of culture, in terms of a biological organism. According to many fin-de-siècle theorists, cultural development is cyclical: it has a beginning, a rise, a period of maturity, and a decline. This perspective also holds true in the case of Tammsaare, in whose literary works beginnings and endings are often interwoven, both symbolically and thematically. Tammsaare depicts the highest forms of civilization and their representatives as natural objects or organisms – comparable to other living beings, yet more highly evolved – one of the underlying assumptions in his work is that culture is governed by a natural life cycle, or that culture undergoes a life course similar to that of animals.⁷⁹ This cycle follows the rhythms of days and seasons, passing through periods of emergence, maturation, and decline.

Spiritual and transnational dimensions

Interpreters of *Kõrboja peremees* have paid little attention to the First World War,⁸⁰ instead situating the novel – often implicitly – against the Estonian War of Independence (1918–1920), largely because it was published in 1922. The text itself, however, refers explicitly only to the so-called Great War, whose devastating consequences, rooted in aggressive nationalism, Tammsaare repeatedly criticized throughout his work, including his journalism.⁸¹ The novel can therefore be read as intertwining its tragic love story with broader and deeper reflections on nationalism and its limits.

Like many of his contemporaries, Tammsaare was acutely aware both burdens of the past and of the new political realities that emerged with the birth of the Republic of Estonia (1918–

1940). In *Kõrboja peremees*, as throughout his work, he portrays the people as heirs to a complex historical legacy shaped by serfdom and by the harshness of the natural environment.⁸² Wetlands and rocky, difficult-to-cultivate soils play a symbolically charged role both in *Kõrboja peremees* and in the *Truth and Justice* series (1926–1933),⁸³ as does the absence of an heir at the Kõrboja farm – a condition that threatens continuity and stability and gestures toward the fragile aspiration for permanence in a newly independent state.

Such conditions place pressure on national-romantic ideals formed during the nineteenth-century National Awakening and intensified during the Estonian War of Independence (1918–1920). These ideals are nostalgically projected in the imagination of Anna's father, the old Rein, who envisions Kõrboja as a magical or mythical land of limitless possibility – an imagined place known not through direct experience but through patriotic poetry, and thus more familiar than the real one.⁸⁴ The agrarian reality depicted in *Kõrboja peremees*, however, offers a clear counter-narrative to this vision, exposing decay, degeneration, and social as well as psychological fragmentation, even if the novel's conclusion gestures ambiguously toward continuity.

This critical distance from romantic nationalism has often prompted accusations of insufficient patriotism or idealism in Tammsaare's work: the peasantry is portrayed unflatteringly, and his characters fail to serve as moral or intellectual exemplars.⁸⁵ Yet this erosion of idealism situates the novel within a broader interwar European literary tendency, particularly in works from rural peripheries, such as Knut Hamsun's *Markens grøde* [Growth of the Soil] (1917) and the Finnish neo-naturalist novels of Joel Lehtonen and Frans Emil Sillanpää. Lehtonen's *Villi* (1905), for instance, features a Nietzschean protagonist, Villi [wild] who recalls Tammsaare's Villu. Like *Kõrboja peremees*, these texts dismantle the pastoral myth by exposing violence, moral ambiguity, and existential instability beneath the veneer of rural order, aligning the countryside not with national romantic regeneration but with decline and disillusionment.

Yet, while *Kõrboja peremees* participates in these broader tendencies, it shifts the emphasis from externally transformed realities brought about by rapid modernization to internal, emotional,

and affective change. The novel registers the transition from rural to urban culture and engages with contemporary debates surrounding the tensions between countryside and city that accompanied Estonia's accelerated modernization. Although this shift is marked by social indicators – most notably Anna's education in St. Petersburg – the narrative is less concerned with social transformation as such than with the characters' inner conflicts. Through the figures of Anna and Villu, Tammsaare explores the ambivalent affective identities and heightened self-reflexivity that fin-de-siècle thinkers such as Baudelaire, Bourget, and Nietzsche associated with the modern urban mentality. Rather than foregrounding the material manifestations of modernization, the novel focuses on its psychological consequences, often articulated through a Nietzschean lens. Within the context of early twentieth-century Estonian literature, Tammsaare thus gives compelling form to what Friedebert Tuglas described as the growing influence of the 'urban spirit' on rural life.

vahest mitte seevõrra tähtis pole meie linnade kasvamine, kui just linna vaimu, mõtlemisviisi, linnalise psühholoogia maale tungimine ajalehe, rahvahariduse, poliitika ja kõigi uue aja ideede kaudu. [...] Tekivad hoopis uued ühiselulised ja isikulised vahekorrad, kujuneb hulk uusi olemasolu tingimusi, muutub täielikult endine usuliste, kõlbeliste ning poliitiliste väärtuste tasakaal.

[but perhaps the growth of cities is not as important as the penetration of the urban spirit, mindset, and urban psychology into the countryside through newspapers, public education, politics, and all the other ideas of the modern age. [...] Completely new social and personal relations are emerging, a set of new conditions of existence is being formed, as the balance of former religious, moral, and political values is completely changing.]⁸⁶

In this respect, and in Tammsaare's own terminology, the key psychological categories are *mats* and *vurle*, concepts he elaborates in his often-cited, manifesto-like essay 'Avalik kiri kirjanik A. H. Tammsaarele' [An Open Letter to A. H. Tammsaare] (1927).⁸⁷ *Mats* denotes 'a steadfast, tough, and enduring bearer of life's core values' and is thus associated with a peasant mentality, whereas *vurle* lacks both character and form – nothing is sacred to the *vurle*.⁸⁸ Tammsaare argues that *mats* has become socially marginalized across Europe, 'Mats on nurka surutud' [is driven into a corner] as an urban mentality spreads into rural life.⁸⁹ Drawing on a later formulation by the acclaimed Estonian writer, critic, and theatre director Mati Unt (1944-2005), the modern individuals in

Tammsaare's terms are *matsvurle* – figures defined by profound ambivalence.⁹⁰ Many of Tammsaare's protagonists, including Anna and Villu, can thus be read as emblematic *matsvurle* figures, negotiating the tension between traditional rural values and the pressures of modernization.

This tension resonates with broader Nordic concerns about rapid modernization. The concept of *matsvurle* is closely related to the figure of the upstart – *tõusik* in Estonian and *nousukas* in Finnish (see the introduction, as well as the articles by Hinrikus and Parente-Čapková plus Huusko in this special issue). While Friedebert Tuglas initially criticized his own generation – the Young Estonia movement – for being 'teoreetilised eurooplased' [theoretically European]⁹¹ and producing literature that was overly artificial and detached from lived experience, during the First World War he had reframed these concerns as a problem of 'tõusiku kultuur' [upstart culture], explicitly linking them to questions of Estonianness. However, the most influential literary embodiment of both excessive Europeaness and problematic Estonianness appears in Tuglas' novel *Felix Ormusson* (1915), whose protagonist combines 'European' decadence with the traits of a 'local' or 'national' upstart.⁹²

Yet on a philosophical level, the notions of theoretical Europeaness and/or Estonianness point to a crisis of language and, more broadly, a crisis of representation: an acute awareness that language and other sign systems are no longer capable of representing reality directly or reliably. In this sense, the critique extends beyond psychological change brought about by rapid urbanization to a deeper epistemological uncertainty. Against this background, one can recognize the influence of fin-de-siècle thinkers, most notably Nietzsche, but also Ernst Mach, Sigmund Freud, and Hugo von Hofmannsthal, whose works were certainly familiar to Tammsaare, Tuglas, and other Nordic artists.

These points are further clarified in Tammsaare's essay 'An Open Letter to A. H. Tammsaare' to which we referred above.⁹³ There, he makes it clear that he is ultimately not concerned with doctrinal or ideological systems as such: 'kõik need pisitillukesed asjakesed, mida

püüame temasse istutada usu, kõlbluse, rahvuse, karskuse ja jumal teab mille nimel' [all those tiny little things which we try to instil into us in the name of faith, morals, nationality, abstinence, and God knows what].⁹⁴ Even 'Europeanness', he argues, is merely another belief system – one 'tiny little thing' among many others.⁹⁵ In this sense, the emotionally intense psychodrama of *Kõrboja peremees* signals a clear shift away not only from nationalism toward epistemological concerns, but also toward a universal conception of humanity – a concern that would later become central to existentialist writing. Like several of Tammsaare's philosophical positions, this orientation finds its clearest articulation in 'An Open Letter to A. H. Tammsaare'.

What interested Tammsaare most – even early in his career – was the human psyche, which he regarded as fundamentally unchanged over millennia. In a 1936 article reflecting, among other things, on what kind of theatre might appeal to audiences, he argues: 'Kirevat hulka võivad ühtlaselt rabada ainult kired, mis ühised kõigile [...] kõiki neid huvitab väikeste teisenditega armastus, kadedus, viha, võimuiha, omakasu, auahnus, varandusehimu.' [The motley crowd can be equally stirred only by passions common to all [...] what interests them all, with only minor variations, is love, envy, hatred, the lust for power, self-interest, ambition, and the desire for wealth.]⁹⁶ This emphasis on enduring emotional structures – clearly influenced by Nietzschean psychology – further underscores his conviction that literature's most significant task lies not in representing social programmes or ideological identities, but in probing the persistent psychological forces that shape human existence.

Conclusion

In this article, we have examined Tammsaare's *Kõrboja peremees* through the lens of spiritual naturalism, situating the novel within the broader currents of realistic and naturalistic prose that sought innovative forms of expression in the early twentieth century. *Kõrboja peremees* exemplifies Tammsaare's effort to expand the boundaries of naturalistic documentation towards a mystical, spiritual reality charged with decadent sensibility. References to myth and the conversions of

biblical narratives – particularly those favoured by decadent aesthetes – along with cyclical conceptions of time, create a layered reality that distances the narrative from the documented surface of ordinary life. The novel's focus on inner conflicts and its depiction of tormented, obsessive love in the spirit of decadence forms an important part of this tendency, which marks a shift away from external documentation of characters determined by their milieu toward the exploration of psychological paradoxes – an approach that would later inform the conception of the absurd in modernist aesthetics.⁹⁷ While much scholarship on spirituality and religion in fin-de-siècle and decadent literature has focused primarily on their thematic manifestations,⁹⁸ our analysis has emphasized the formal and subtler, more indirect means through which spirituality is evoked in Tammsaare's work. These include narrative structures that obscure fully knowable reality, the intensification of emotion through stylistic devices, and the use of decadent oxymorons embedded in characterization and other narrative tropes. In this way Tammsaare's spiritual naturalism is shaped by both in its formal structures and thematic concerns.

Together with these formal and thematic innovations, the novel illustrates Tammsaare's challenge to simplified truths and his embrace of Nietzschean ideas, including perspectivism. *Kõrboja peremees* resists reductive ideas of truth and schematic readings of characters as merely ideological symbols or singular messages. At the same time, the novel's turn toward questions of universal humanity creates a distance from narrowly national (romantic) concerns and the realistic representation of the family epic.

¹ This article was supported by the Estonian Research Council grant PRG1667, 'Tsiviliseeritud rahvuse teke: Dekadents kui üleminek 1905-1940' [The Emergence of a Civilized Nation: Decadence as Transitionality, 1905–1940], www.decadence.ee. We are grateful to the members of the decadence project and to Tiina Ann Kirss for their valuable comments and suggestions.

² This quotation from Fyodor Dostoevsky is taken from an article written about him by A. H. Tammsaare in 1924. See A. H. Tammsaare, 'Sissejuhatuseks', *A. H. Tammsaare. Kogutud teosed 16. köide. Publiitsistika II (1914-1925)* (Eesti Raamat, 1988), pp. 619-48 (p. 648). Dostoevsky was one of Tammsaare's favourite authors, whose influence is frequently noted by Estonian scholars. See, for example, Marina Grišakova, 'Mõtteid Tammsaarest, Nietzschest ja Dostojevskist', *Vikerkaar*, 1-2 (2005), pp. 80-86.

³ A. H. Tammsaare was born as Anton Hansen. Around 1903, he began using the pseudonym "A. H. Tammsaare", adopting the name of his family's farm in central Estonia (Põhja-Tammsaare, or North Tammsaare). Thus, the initials "A. H." refer not to the first names of the pseudonym, but to his birth name, Anton Hansen. For the sake of

clarity and consistency, however, we refer to him simply as Tammsaare, following common practice in English-language scholarship.

⁴ See Tõnu Õnnepalu, 'Saateks', in A. H. Tammsaare, *Kõrboja peremees* (Tänapäev, 2018), pp. 177–223, (p. 177).

⁵ Epp Annus 'Kõrboja peremees – romaan väikese algustähega', A. H. Tammsaare, *Kõrboja peremees* (Avita, 2007), pp. 141–51; Toomas Haug, 'A. H. T. lahkumine Koitjärevelt. Lapse sünn "Kõrboja peremehe"', *Klassikute lahkumine. 25 kirjatööd* (Eesti Keele Sihtasutus, 2010), pp. 18–38; Mirjam Hinrikus, *Dekadentlik modernismkogemus A. H. Tammsaare ja nooreestlaste loomingus*. Dissertationes litterarum et contemplationis comparativae Universitatis Tartuensis, 10 (Tartu ülikooli kirjastus, 2011); Maarja Vaino, *Irratsionaalsuse poeetika A. H. Tammsaare loomingus*, Tallinna ülikool. Humanitaarteaduste dissertatsioonid, 26 (Tallinna ülikooli kirjastus, 2011); Õnnepalu, 'Saateks', Arne Merilai, 'A. H. Tammsaare's Epic Musicality', *Interlitteraria*, 26.1 (2021), pp. 265–80.

⁶ The setting of the novel can be described as an agrarian family epic, which links it to a set of metaphors recurring in narratives of the nation across literary traditions, such as the relationship between the people and the land. See Patrick Colm Hogan, *Understanding Nationalism: On Narrative, Cognitive Science, and Identity* (Ohio State University Press, 2009), pp. 148–49. However, the fact that Tammsaare both mobilizes and challenges these metaphors in the spirit of decadence was already noted by his contemporary critics. In 1916, Tuglas argued that Tammsaare's work published up to that point constituted a mixture of naturalism, neo-romanticism, and symbolism. See Friedebert Tuglas, 'A. H. Tammsaare', *Kriitika III* (Noor-Eesti, [1916] 1935), pp. 81–136. This assessment was later reiterated by several critics, including Gustav Suits, *Eesti kirjanduslugu* (Ilmamaa, [1936] 1999).

⁷ In this article, we understand realism as a transhistorical mode of representation, one that has existed since antiquity but whose techniques were largely developed and codified in nineteenth-century classical realist fiction. The nineteenth-century naturalist novel adopts many of these realist conventions – such as narrative objectivity and transparency, linear plot progression, a serious tone, and an anchoring of the narrative in concrete historical time and place – while also introducing its own specific themes. These include a focus on scientific determinism, hereditary degeneration, and the influence of environment and biology on human behaviour, reflecting the broader influence of the scientific worldview of the late nineteenth century. See e.g., Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. by Willard R. Trask (Princeton University Press, [1946] 2003). See Philippe Hamon, 'Un discours contrain', *Littérature et réalité*, ed. by Gérard Genette and Tzvetan Todorov (Éditions du Seuil, 1982), pp. 119–81.

⁸ A related concept, *surnaturalisme*, appears in Charles Baudelaire's diary, where he uses it to describe moments marked by an intensified perception of time and space, combined with a strain of satanic irony (see Charles Baudelaire, *Mu alasti kistud süda: päevikumärkmed. Loomingu Raamatukogu*, 30. trans. by Kristjan Haljak (SA Kultuurileht, 2014), pp. 16–17; see Jaan Undusk, 'Tuglase sümbolistlik manifest', *Friedebert Tuglas. Kogutud teosed*, 12 (Underi ja Tuglase Kirjanduskeskus, 2013), pp. 472–79 (pp. 477–78).

⁹ See Ellis Hanson, *Decadence and Catholicism* (Harvard University Press, 1997), and Riikka Rossi, 'Primitivism and Spiritual Emotions: F. E. Sillanpää's Rural Decadence', in *Nordic Literature of Decadence*, ed. by Pirjo Lyytikäinen, Riikka Rossi, Viola Parente-Čapková, and Mirjam Hinrikus (Routledge, 2020), pp. 119–35.

¹⁰ See Päivi Lappalainen, *Koti, kansa ja maailman tabraava lika: Näkökulmia 1880–1890-luvun kirjallisuuteen* (Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura, 2000), p. 76–77. On spirituality in turn-of-the-twentieth-century Finnish literature and art, see also Maarit Leskelä-Kärki et al., *Uuden Etsijät: Salatieteiden ja okkultismin suomalainen kulttuurihistoria 1880–1930* (Kustannusosakeyhtiö Teos, 2021).

¹¹ Friedebert Tuglas, *Juhan Liiv. Monografia* (Noor-Eesti, 1914); see Jaan Undusk, 'Tuglase sümbolistlik manifest', *Friedebert Tuglas. Kogutud teosed*, 12 (Underi ja Tuglase Kirjanduskeskus, 2013), pp. 476–77.

¹² A. H. Tammsaare, 'Uued raamatud', *A. H. Tammsaare. Kogutud teosed 15. Publiksistika I (1902–1914)* (Eesti Raamat, [1914] 1986), pp. 303–05 (p. 304).

¹³ Besides the Russian writers, especially Fyodor Dostoevsky, most often discussed in Tammsaare scholarship, Tammsaare also wrote essays and reviews on Oscar Wilde, Maurice Maeterlinck, F. E. Sillanpää, Henrik Ibsen, Aino Kallas, August Strindberg, and many others.

¹⁴ A. H. Tammsaare, 'Pilguk kirjanus', *A. H. Tammsaare, Kogutud teosed 15*, [1907], pp. 210–14 (p. 214).

¹⁵ A. H. Tammsaare, 'Friedrich Nietzsche. Linnulennult', *A. H. Tammsaare, Kogutud teosed 15*, [1909], pp. 226–34; Mirjam Hinrikus, Merlin Kirikal, 'Decadence as Dynamism and Mutability: The Nietzschean-Bergsonian Imprint in the Early Works of A. H. Tammsaare and J. Semper', *Revue Belge de philologie et d'histoire*, 100 (2022), pp. 717–40 (p. 730), doi:10.3406/rbph.

¹⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, trans. by Judith Norman (Cambridge University Press, 2002, [1886]), §12 and §19.

¹⁷ Ibid., §34; Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. by Walter Kaufmann (Vintage, 1974, [1882]), §374; Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for All and None*, trans. by Adrian del Caro (Cambridge University Press, 2006).

¹⁸ Mario Praz, *The Romantic Agony*, trans. by Angus Davidson (Oxford University Press, 1970, [1952]); John R. Reed, *Decadent Style* (Ohio University Press, 1985).

¹⁹ According to Reuven Tsur, mystic poetry aspires to create a sense of fusion by using abstract images that render clear-cut categorization less distinct – by blurring the borders between categories, softening the limits, and

establishing a new uncategorized unity in our perception. See Reuven Tsur, *On the Shore of Nothingness: Space, Rhythm, and Semantic Structure in Religious Poetry and Its Mystic-Secular Counterpart: A Study in Cognitive Poetics* (Imprint Academic, 2015), pp. 36-37.

²⁰ Friedebert Tuglas, 'Kirjanduslik stiil', *Noor-Eesti*, 4 (1912), pp. 23-100; see also Aino Kallas *Noor-Eesti. Näpildid ja sihtjooned*, trans. by Friedebert Tuglas (Noor-Eesti, [1918] 1921).

²¹ Friedrich Nietzsche connects the Dionysian with transgression, irrationality, and the darker, instinctual aspects of human nature, in contrast to Apollonian order, reason, and individuation. He discusses the Apollonian and Dionysian dimensions of Greek culture most extensively in *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872).

²² Pirjo Lyytikäinen, *Narkissos ja sfinksi: Minä ja Toinen vuosisadanvaihteen kirjallisuudessa* (Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura, 1997).

²³ A. H. Tammsaare, *Kõrboja peremees, Kogutud teosed*, 5 (Eesti Raamat, 1980), p. 8. Here and throughout this article quotations from *Kõrboja peremees* are cited from this edition. We have also consulted the Finnish translation (A. H. Tammsaare, *Korpiojan isäntä*, trans. by Juhani Salokannel (Aviador, 2022)). Unless otherwise indicated, all English translations from *Kõrboja peremees* and the secondary literature are our own.

²⁴ In this respect, it is also useful to bear in mind the influence of Georg Simmel, whose thinking – shaped in dialogue with Nietzsche – conceptualizes masculinized creativity as the imposition of form upon the flux of gendered (i.e. feminized) life. See Angelika Sendlinger, *Lebenspathos und Décadence um 1900: Studien zur Dialektik der Décadence und der Lebensphilosophie am Beispiel Eduard von Keyserlings und Georg Simmels* (Peter Lang 1994); See Mirjam Hinrikus, *Dekadentlik modernsuskogemus A. H. Tammsaare ja nooreestlaste loomingus*, pp. 88-92. Creativity in Tammsaare's works is almost everywhere masculinized; see Mirjam Hinrikus, 'Tammsaare's Constructions of Femininity in Light of Weininger's Concept of Sex Difference', *Journal of Baltic Studies*, 46.2, pp. 171-97.

²⁵ In the Estonian landscape, where natural elevations are generally low, a *mägi* ('hill') denotes a modest rise rather than a mountain. In the novel, however, Kivimägi ('Stone Hill') is far more than a geographical location: it functions as a symbolic place representing Villu's existential bond with the land and his commitment to an authentic way of life. See e.g. Epp Annus, 'Kõrboja peremees – romaan väikese algustähega', pp. 141-51.

²⁶ See Antti Ahmala, *Miten tulla sellaiseksi kuin on? Autenttisuus ja itsestä vieraantuminen Joel Lehtosen varhaistuotannossa* (University of Helsinki, 2016), see also Ahmala's article in this issue.

²⁷ Tammsaare, *Kõrboja peremees*, p. 30.

²⁸ In this regard, *Kõrboja peremees* – like many other works by Tammsaare (see also the article by Hinrikus and Parente-Čapková in this issue) – draws on the prototypical structure of romantic narratives from Shakespeare to Jane Austen to modern romantic fiction. As Hogan (*Understanding Nationalism*, p. 90) articulates, a prototypical romantic plot begins with two individuals falling in love, yet this love is fraught with difficulties. Central to these conflicts is the tension with social hierarchy – most often familial, but occasionally religious or political. Such conflict typically arises for one of two reasons: either the relationship contravenes the preferences of an authority, such as the parents' opposition, or the lovers belong to socially antagonistic or hierarchically divided groups (e.g., rival nations or disparate social classes), rendering their union taboo within the prevailing social order.

²⁹ Reed, *Decadent Style*, p. 22; David Weir, *Decadence and the Making of Modernism* (University of Massachusetts Press, 1996); See Pirjo Lyytikäinen, Riikka Rossi, Viola Parente-Čapková, and Mirjam Hinrikus, 'Afterword: The Specters of Decadence in Later Nordic Literature', in *Nordic Literature of Decadence*, ed. by Pirjo Lyytikäinen, Riikka Rossi, Viola Parente-Čapková, and Mirjam Hinrikus (Routledge, 2020), pp. 257-72 (pp. 258-59).

³⁰ Tammsaare, *Kõrboja peremees*, p. 13.

³¹ Ibid., p. 20.

³² Ibid., p. 19

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid., pp. 19-20.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 44.

³⁶ However, Önnepalu suggests that they may have had a physical relationship but does not address the possibility of violence, See Önnepalu, 'Saateks'.

³⁷ Bram Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siècle Culture* (Oxford University Press, 1986).

³⁸ Tammsaare, *Kõrboja peremees*, p. 74.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 117.

⁴⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. by Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (Vintage Books, 1968).

⁴¹ However, a certain narrative asymmetry (see Alex Woloch, *The One vs. the Many: Minor Characters and the Space of the Protagonist in the Novel* (Princeton University Press, 2003) characterizes the representations of these views, as Villu's perspective, rendered through free indirect discourse, is more amply opened than Anna's view. In contrast, Anna's viewpoint is less developed within the narrative. The narrative gender hierarchy extends to the other characters; for instance, the focalization of the old Rein occupies narrative space. About sexism and misogyny in Tammsaare's works, see Hinrikus, 'Tammsaare's Constructions of Femininity in Light of Weininger's Concept of Sex Difference'

⁴² Reed, *Decadent Style*, pp. 24-26. Pirjo Lyytikäinen, *Narkissos ja sfinksi: Minä ja Toinen vuosisadanvaihteen kirjallisuudessa* (Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura, 1997). On love and desire in Tammsaare's work from a psychoanalytic viewpoint, see also Maire Jaanus, 'Tammsaare and Love', *Interlitteraria*, 10 (2005), pp. 179-95.

⁴³ Praz, *The Romantic Agony*.

⁴⁴ According to Jaan Undusk, love in the works of Tammsaare is always bound up with death, because an intense emotion can endure only as long as there is distance between the two lovers. See Jaan Undusk, 'Armastus ja sotsioloogia. Sisesevaade Tammsaare maailma', *Armastus ja sotsioloogia. A. H. Tammsaare 'Ma armastasin sakslast'*, ed. by Mirjam Hinrikus, Jaan Undusk, (Underi ja Tuglase Kirjanduskeskus, 2013), pp. 244-344; (pp. 252-61 & 286).

⁴⁵ Praz, *The Romantic Agony*, p. 36.

⁴⁶ See Aino Kallas, Noor-Eesti. Näopildid ja sihtjooned. On this collection and its connections to decadence, see Mirjam Hinrikus, 'Decadent Modernism and the Imprint of Taine in Aino Kallas' Young Estonia: Portraits and Trajectories', *Aino Kallas. Negotiations with Modernity*, ed by Leena Kurvet Käosaar and Lea Rojola (Finnish Literature Society, 2011), pp. 66-90.

⁴⁷ See Aino Kallas, *Noor-Eesti. Näopildid ja sihtjooned*, p. 133.

⁴⁸ Haug, 'A. H. T. lahkumine Koitjärevelt. Lapse sünni "Kõrboja peremehe"'.
⁴⁹ See Önnepalu, 'Saateks', p. 190.

⁵⁰ The original manuscript title of *Kõrboja peremees* was *Metsjesuke* [*The Little Jesus of the Forest*]. See Maarja Vaino, 'Kõrboja peremees' – romaan unistamisest ja eksitustest', in A. H. Tammsaare, *Kõrboja peremees*, with commentary by Maarja Vaino (Tallinna kirjanduskeskus, 2022), pp. 165-76 (p. 165).

⁵¹ Tsur argues that mystic poetry tends intuitively to evoke a sense of invisible background or the existence of an unseen presence. See Tsur, *On the Shore of Nothingness*, pp. 13 & 66.

⁵² Rossi, 'Primitivism and Spiritual Emotions', p. 127.

⁵³ In 1923, Estonian writer and critic Albert Kivikas argued even that *Kõrboja peremees* was a plagiarism of Knut Hamsun's *Pan*. It is nevertheless important to note that Hamsun is only one of many authors to whom Tammsaare's works allude. See also Hinrikus and Parente-Čapková in this issue.

⁵⁴ See Mirjam Hinrikus & Merlin Kirikal, 'Decadence as Dynamism and Mutability: The Nietzschean-Bergsonian Imprint in the Early Works of A. H. Tammsaare and J. Semper; See also Mirjam Hinrikus, Merlin Kirikal, 'Dekadents ja elu. Nietzsche-bergsonlik liikumise ning voolamise esteetika Tammsaare ja Semperi varases proosas', *Keel ja Kirjandus*, 67.1-2 (2024), pp. 108-43 (p. 127).

⁵⁵ A. H. Tammsaare, *Kõrboja peremees*, pp. 61-62.

⁵⁶ Chris M. Meadows, *A Psychological Perspective on Joy and Emotional Fulfilment* (Routledge, 2014), pp. 193-95; Tsur, *On the Shore of Nothingness*, p. 20.

⁵⁷ See Vaino, *Irratsionaalsuse poeetika A. H. Tammsaare loomingus*; see Merilai, 'A. H. Tammsaare's Epic Musicality'.

⁵⁸ See Ben Etherington, *Literary Primitivism* (Stanford University Press, 2017), pp. 116-20, on the effects of repetition in primitivistic poetry.

⁵⁹ On the concept of tone and mood, see Noël Carroll, 'Art and Mood: Preliminary Notes and Conjectures', *The Monist*, 86.4 (2003), pp. 521-55; Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Harvard University Press, 2005); Marco Caracciolo, 'Perspectives on Narrative and Mood', in *How to Do Things with Narrative: Cognitive and Diachronic Perspectives*, ed. by Jan Alber and Greta Olson (De Gruyter, 2017), pp. 15-27.

⁶⁰ Transparency, coherence, and a certain ease of reading have been considered key aspects of 'readerly' realistic texts; see e.g., Roland Barthes, *S/Z* (Éditions du Seuil, 1970).

⁶¹ Reed, *Decadent Style*, p. 28.

⁶² Tammsaare, *Kõrboja peremees* p. 75.

⁶³ About masculinity, sexuality and peasant society, see, e.g., Kirsi Pohjola-Vilkuna, *Eros kylässä. Maaseudun luovaton seksuaalisuus vuosisadan vaihteessa* (Suomen Kirjallisuuden Seura, 1995).

⁶⁴ Tammsaare, *Kõrboja peremees*, p. 95.

⁶⁵ See Lyytikäinen, *Narkissos ja sfinksi*, p. 31.

⁶⁶ 'There is only a perspective seeing, only a perspective "knowing"; and the more affects we allow to speak about one thing, the more eyes, different eyes, we can use to observe one thing, the more complete will our "concept" of this thing, our "objectivity", be'; see Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, trans. by Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (Vintage, [1887] 1989), third Essay, section 12, p. 119.

⁶⁷ Tammsaare, *Kõrboja peremees* p. 95.

⁶⁸ On the opposition between positive love and negative marriage in Tammsaare's works, see Undusk, 'Armastus ja sotsioloogia. Sisesevaade Tammsaare maailma'. It should be added that this opposition applies primarily to the male characters rather than to the female character, see Hinrikus, 'Tammsaare's Constructions of Femininity in Light of Weininger's Concept of Sex Difference'.

⁶⁹ Tammsaare, *Kõrboja peremees*, p. 114.

⁷⁰ 'tulge Kõrbojale peremeheks [...]. Tulge või täna sisse, tulge jalamaid, tulge pühapäevariietes' [Please, come to Kõrboja to be the Master of Kõrboja [...]. Come even today, come straight away, come in your Sunday clothes]. (Tammsaare, *Kõrboja peremees* p. 120).

⁷¹ As Ahmala (*Miten tulla sellaiseksi kuin olen?* pp. 33-4) argues, the Nietzschean pursuit of authenticity involves questioning established meanings and embracing creativity. Nietzsche posits that while shared values provide safety for the masses, the quest for authenticity is a challenge meant for a higher individual – one who shapes their life as a

work of art, guided by a strong, unbreakable will that enables them to create a meaningful existence. See also Ahmala's article in this issue of *Volupté*.

⁷² Tammsaare, *Kõrboja peremees* p. 127.

⁷³ In the fin-de-siècle literature, suicide emerges as a recurrent motif notably in Henrik Ibsen's plays, where it is often similarly portrayed as a radical solution to existential anxiety and a pathway to freedom. Several male characters in Tammsaare's works also commit suicide. See also Hinrikus and Parente-Čapková in this issue.

⁷⁴ See also Paolo Stellino, 'Nietzsche on Suicide', *Nietzsche Studien*, 42.1 (2013), pp. 151-77.

⁷⁵ Tammsaare, *Kõrboja peremees* p. 129.

⁷⁶ Those scholars whose perspective is shaped by national romanticism tend to emphasize precisely the aspect of rebirth (e.g., Haug, 'A. H. T. lahkumine Koitjärvelt. Lapse süünd "Kõrboja peremees"', Vaino, *Irratsionaalsuse poeetika A. H. Tammsaare loomingus*.) The author's original title, *The Little Jesus of the Forest* (*Metsjeesuke*), also alludes to rebirth and redemption. The novel was later retitled *Kõrboja peremees*. See also endnote 50.

⁷⁷ Tammsaare, *Kõrboja peremees*, p. 134.

⁷⁸ See Haug, 'A. H. T. lahkumine Koitjärvelt. Lapse süünd "Kõrboja peremees"'.

⁷⁹ Neville Morley, 'Decadence as a Theory of History', *New Literary History*, 35.4 (2005), pp. 573-85 (p. 573);

Hinrikus, *Dekadentlik modernsuskogemus A. H. Tammsaare ja nooreestlaste loomingus*, pp. 59-63.

⁸⁰ For example, *Kõrboja peremees* refers to Villu's older brother, who died in the First World War, and to the calendar reform, which involved the change from the Julian to the Gregorian system in February 1918. In Chapter Six there is an allusion to the calendar change, which allows Anna for the first time this year to celebrate her birthday on St John's (Midsummer) Eve (p. 38).

⁸¹ Tammsaare's pacifist ideas are clearly reflected in his 1919 collection of articles, 'Sõjamõtted' [Thoughts on War].

⁸² For discussions of the complex (post)colonial relationship between the Estonian population, largely of serf origin, and the ruling Baltic German cultural elite, see the article by Hinrikus and Parente-Čapková in this issue.

⁸³ Between 2014 and 2025, Volumes I-III of *Tõde ja õigus* appeared in English translation as *Truth and Justice*.

See also Piret Peiker, *Discourses of Modernity: The Case of Estonian Literature* (Saint Helena, CA: Helena History Press, 2024), pp. 210-25. Peiker reads Tammsaare's '*Tõde ja õigus*' [*Truth and Justice*] primarily through the lenses of postcolonial modernity and the philosophy of history, in line with a tradition of Tammsaare scholarship that tends to privilege motifs of rebirth and redemption over a decadently ambivalent aesthetic.

⁸⁴ Tammsaare, *Kõrboja peremees*, p. 31.

⁸⁵ Johannes Aavik, 'Tõde ja õigus I', *Eesti kirjandus*, 12 (1926), pp. 662-64.

⁸⁶ Friedebert Tuglas, in *Noor-Eesti IV* (1912), pp. 23-100, (pp. 95-97).

⁸⁷ This 'Open Letter' (See A. H. Tammsaare, 'Avalik kiri kirjanik A. H. Tammsaarele', *A. H. Tammsaare. Kogutud teosed*, 17, *Publitsistika III (1926-1940)*, (Eesti Raamat, [1927] 1990), pp. 273-84 (pp. 278-79) was written in response to the partly critical reception of the first volume of '*Tõde ja õigus*' [*Truth and Justice*]. Among Tammsaare's most outspoken critics was the Young Estonia writer, Francophile, and language reformer Johannes Aavik. See also the introduction to this issue.

⁸⁸ The word *mats* derive from a common peasant given name (Mats < *Matthias*) and originally functioned as a neutral designation for a 'simple person' or a peasant. Within the estate-based Baltic German social order, however, it acquired a pejorative connotation, becoming a condescending and hierarchical label for the Estonian peasantry. The word *vurle* most likely originates from Baltic German colloquial speech and is associated with the German word *Wurzel* [root], which was used ironically to denote a rootless, superficial, and imitative urban individual. In Estonian usage, the term thus came to express a critical judgement of lifestyle and attitudes rather than of social or ethnic origin.

⁸⁹ See Tammsaare, 'Avalik kiri kirjanik A. H. Tammsaarele', p. 279.

⁹⁰ Mati Unt, 'Matsvurle', *Sirp* 42 (2000).

⁹¹ Tuglas, *Kirjanduslik stiil*.

⁹² Mirjam Hinrikus, 'Theoretically European and/or Upstart? Decadence in an Estonian Key', *Nordic Literature of Decadence*, pp. 233-47.

⁹³ Tammsaare, 'Avalik kiri kirjanik A. H. Tammsaarele'; see endnote 88 above.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 274.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

⁹⁶ Tammsaare, 'Näidend, rahvas ja arvustaja', *A. H. Tammsaare. Kogutud teosed*, 17, pp. 486-92, (p. 487).

⁹⁷ As Ástráður Eysteinnsson observes, modernism is driven by a desire to disrupt and problematize the communicative conventions of realism. Ástráður Eysteinnsson, *The Concept of Modernity* (Cornell University Press, 1990), p. 238.

⁹⁸ E.g., Hanson, *Decadence and Catholicism*.