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Strange vegetation: Emotional undercurrents of Tove Jansson's *Moominvalley in November*

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Abstract: This article investigates the emotional undercurrents of Tove Jansson's *Moominvalley in November*. I argue that one of the main characters of Jansson's book is the autumn forest that surrounds the abandoned Moomin house. The decomposing forest is not just an emblem of the inner lives of the guests that gather in the house but is an active character itself: an ambiguous life form that creeps in the house and must be expelled from its living core. I further demonstrate that the emotion of disgust has a crucial role in Jansson's narrative, and that an adequate analysis of the intentional content of disgust allows us to see what is at issue in the relations between the characters. In my reading, the main insight of Tove Jansson's last Moomin book is not about loss or sorrow but is about the human capacity to begin anew by composing novel wholes from scraps.

Keywords: Tove Jansson, Moomin, Aurel Kolnai, disgust, emotion, perception, movement, death

1 Leftovers

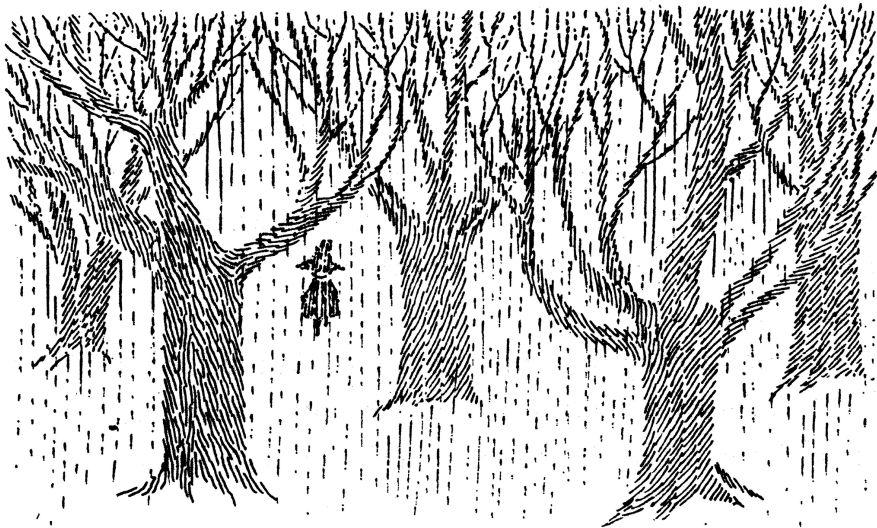
Moominvalley in November (1970) is Tove Jansson's last Moomin book, written during the year of her mother's fatal sickness and death.¹ The book is usually characterized as melancholy and gloomy, and there are obvious grounds for this, both on the level of narration and on the level of the setting. We find ourselves in an empty cold house surrounded by a dying garden and a motionless grey sea. It is November, the last month of the Nordic autumn, the month of disappearing light. The storyline is composed of several partings and farewells

¹ The original Swedish title is *Sent i november* (Late in November). Jansson also experimented with alternative titles: *Den övergivna dalen* (The deserted valley), *Dröm i november* (Dream in November) and *Den försvunna familjen* (The disappeared family).

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that proceed serially but also in parallel. We are invited to imagine departures from homes, neighbors, friends and beloved ones, but also from our own former selves.

The Moomin family has moved out from their house in the valley and is now travelling to a distant island.² This is when the contemporaneous story in the deserted valley begins.³ The house is silent and the garden is in slow decay. Fall rains begin, and it seems that this year there is no end to them: “The valleys along the coast sank under the weight of all this water that was streaming down the hillsides and the ground rotted away instead of just withering” (Jansson 1970, 20).



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² Jansson records the adventures of the family in her previous book *Moominpappa at Sea* (1965): Moominpappa has grown disillusioned with the idyllic and harmonious life in the valley, structured by the repetitive rhythms of cooking, gardening and fishing, in oblivion of the larger world. He has decided to take his family out to the sea by his sailing boat. The family starts living in a lighthouse on an almost treeless isle, encountering strange characters and otherworldly creatures, but also their own secret emotions.

³ The parallelism of the two books is analyzed by Anni Nupponen in her MA thesis, *Ulkopuoliset, vähän vaaralliset, toisenlaiset: toiseus Tove Janssonin muumikirjoissa* (2008). Nupponen's focus is on the topics of otherness, and her analytical tools stem from Julia Kristeva's discourse of alienness in *Strangers to Ourselves (Étrangers à nous-mêmes 1988)*. See also Korhonen (2015); Ylönen (2014); Korhonen (2007).

In different locations along the coast line, four persons decide, independently of one another, to head to the valley. All four are convinced that one particular member of the departed Moomin family can help them regain balance and find new direction in their lives.

Not far away from the valley, a fearful and anxious fillyjonk sets out to find Moominmamma in order to conciliate her thoughts that suddenly run wild, escalating from maggots and spiders to the basic laws of nature and existence (Jansson 1970, 31). In another valley nearby, an abandoned, introvert orphan Toft determines to head to the valley to discover the warm round friendliness that he associates with Moominmamma and that would allow him to tell others who he was and that he existed.

Toft lives under the boat of a hemulen, who is preoccupied with organizing other peoples' lives and never has time to learn to sail. Once in a year, in early spring, Hemulen removes the tarpaulin, rapidly tars the boat and fixes its cracks, and then pulls the tarpaulin back to its place. But now, unexpectedly struck by the boredom of his own being, the Hemulen decides to abandon his self-inflicted duties and start an adventure with Moominpappa, an old friend – or perhaps just an acquaintance (Jansson 1970, 37).⁴

In a bay not far away, a fourth person, one frightfully old, wakes up and notices that he has forgotten his name. Rather than experiencing this novel type of forgetfulness as yet another failure, he takes it as an opportunity (Jansson 1970, 53). After experimenting with several alternative names, the old person decides that he should be called “Grandpa-Grumble”. He waits for a while to discover what he wants, and finally resolves to trace a memory, or an image.⁵ The plan is to find a joyful party with play, dance and songs, but after arrival, another prospect opens up: Grandpa-Grumble hears about a Moomin Ancestor, who would be equally old as he is or even older, and he determines to find this peer.

None of these characters knows about one another, and when they meet in the valley, they do not care for one another or care to learn to know one another. They are connected merely by their determination to get in contact with the departed family and by their disappointingly faint imitations of the family members. Fillyjonk operates like a grey shadow of Moominmamma; Hemulen renders an unintended caricature of Moominpappa; Toft is a distorted Moomintroll; and Grandpa-Grumble a quickly deteriorating reverse of Little My.

In addition to these four wretched beings, also two other persons arrive. A lovely and delightful but completely self-absorbed Mymbble comes to visit the

4 On the existentialist themes of the book, see, Ylönen (2014).

5 The temporal aspects of Jansson's story are studied by Nieminen (2008).



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Moomins in order to meet her younger sister Little My, who has been adopted by the family. And at the southern end of the coast, Snufkin, a free-spirited and self-contained friend of Moomintroll, realizes that he needs to return to the valley in order to find missing elements of a song that he is writing:

In August, somewhere in Moominvalley, [Snufkin] had hit upon five bars which would undoubtedly provide a marvelous beginning for a tune. They had come completely naturally as notes do when they have been left in peace. Now the time had come to take them out again and let them become a song about rain. Snufkin listened and waited. The five bars didn't come. He went on waiting without getting impatient because he knew what tunes were like. But the only things he could hear were the faint sounds of rain and running water. It gradually got quite dark. Snufkin took out his pipe but put it away again. He knew that the five bars must be somewhere in Moominvalley and that he wouldn't find them until he went back again (Jansson 1970, 34).

When meeting in the valley, Fillyjonk, Toft, Hemulen and Grandpa-Grumble start by quarrelling and arguing. Each person tries to execute his or her plan stubbornly and independently of everyone else, and their obsessions increasingly isolate them from one another. When Mymble and Snufkin arrive with their own fixations, irritation first escalates. But little by little, step by step, the company starts to communicate about occasional daily matters and about fading memories of the family. They share minor tasks and occupations, and finally settle in the different corners of the abandoned house and garden.

The six never become friends, but by the catalytic effect of the absent family they find a respectful manner of interacting with one another, each persistently pursuing their own goals but acquiring new skills and tasks from one another and familiarizing themselves with their own hidden emotions and motives. Thus, we witness the formation of a shady and fleeting counter-family,

composed of leftovers – somewhat similarly as happens in local boozers and bars in the suburbs and villages around the Nordic countries. The existence of such a shadow family is merely temporary, but for a few days, or hours, the members are able to consolidate, support and enliven one another in the way families are supposed or imagined to do.

In a party, dictated by Grandpa-Grumble and organized by the more dutiful members of the company, each person presents something to entertain the others. Next morning Fillyjonk starts to clean the desolated house. The energetic fun of cleaning becomes contagious, and the others join her. After collective scrubbing, shaking, ragging, washing, whipping, mopping and scouring, the house is completely “bare and clean” (Jansson 1970, 176). Then the first snow falls, ices the last trembling leaves, and covers the ground with white flakes.

2 Decomposition

Moominvalley in November thus presents two mirror images: traces of an absent family and a temporary short-term composition made of social fragments. It is significant, however, that the book also figures another type of presence, different in kind from the wretched existence of the six characters with their various fixations and obsessions, but crucial to the course of the events and to the development of the group. This is the November forest itself, in the state of a peculiar transformation:

The forest was heavy with rain and the trees were absolutely motionless. Everything had withered and died, but right down on the ground the late autumn's secret garden was growing with great vigor straight out of the moldering earth, a strange vegetation of shiny puffed-up plants that had nothing at all to do with summer. The late blueberry springs were yellow-green and the cranberry as dark as blood. Hidden lichens and mosses began to grow, and they grew like a big soft carpet until they took over the whole forest (Jansson 1970, 33–34).⁶

The late fall of November is described here, not in terms of the desolation that it brings about in the surrounding forests and woodlands, but in terms of the proliferation that it induces in the undergrowth. In order to detect this new form

⁶ Jansson's working notes include a very similar passage: “Blueberry rods had an intense yellow green color in the wet forest; some drenched berries hung here and there. Lingonberries were dark red, like blood. The fall had deepened some colors, and these were strong like rowanberries; other colors faded into the earth. Leaves on the ground looked like wet skin” (my translation).

of life we should, rather than looking up at the treetops and surveying the crisp autumn sceneries, redirect our gaze down at our feet (cf. Jansson 1965, 100).

The tones that we detect down in the undergrowth differ from the bright reds, oranges and yellows that paint the September foliage. A mixture of hued pink and cinereous, sanguine splattered with creamy white and coal-black, unfamiliar shades of blue and ochre. We know these tainted colors from the works of the great Nordic painters, Helen Schjerfbeck, Hilma af Klint and Edward Munch, but also from Jansson's own expressionist experiments from the 40s.⁷

By each rain shower, new shapes emerge with strange contours and surfaces. The ground is suddenly populated by the oozing caps of the brittlegill and russula fungi, by dark tube-formed funnel chanterelles and by large parasol mushrooms that seem to grow scales on their tops. These fungal growths spring up, like miniature zombies, between the gauze-like texture of rotting leaves. And within this new lower layer of the forest, a whole kingdom of legged and legless creatures busies around: maggots, larvae, worms, centipedes, spiders and beetles. Each seems to be moving in some direction or other but without any clear or stable destination.

Bilingual and fluent in both Swedish and Finnish, Jansson was able to draw from the connotations of both languages. The Finnish word for November is “marraskuu”, the stem of which is the noun “marras” that means saprophyte, that is, plants, fungi and micro-organisms that live on dead bodies and decomposing matters.⁸ The paragraphs in which Jansson describes the autumn forest render a whole florescence of such organisms. This is the late autumn's “secret garden”, the “strange vegetation” that grows “with great vigor straight out of the moldering earth” – very different from the fruits of the summer bloom, but also divergent from the organized harvest of September.

The ground looked like wet leather. The only things that glistened were the flame-colored finger-tip mushrooms growing like small hands out of the dark, and on the tree trunks there were great moldy lumps looking like cream and white velvet (Jansson 1970, 193).

This is an ambiguous life, between mere materiality and free purposeful action, between slow vegetative growth and goal-directed movements governed by the will and instrumental to human projects. Eluding all higher goals, it bustles and quivers, generating ever new formations.

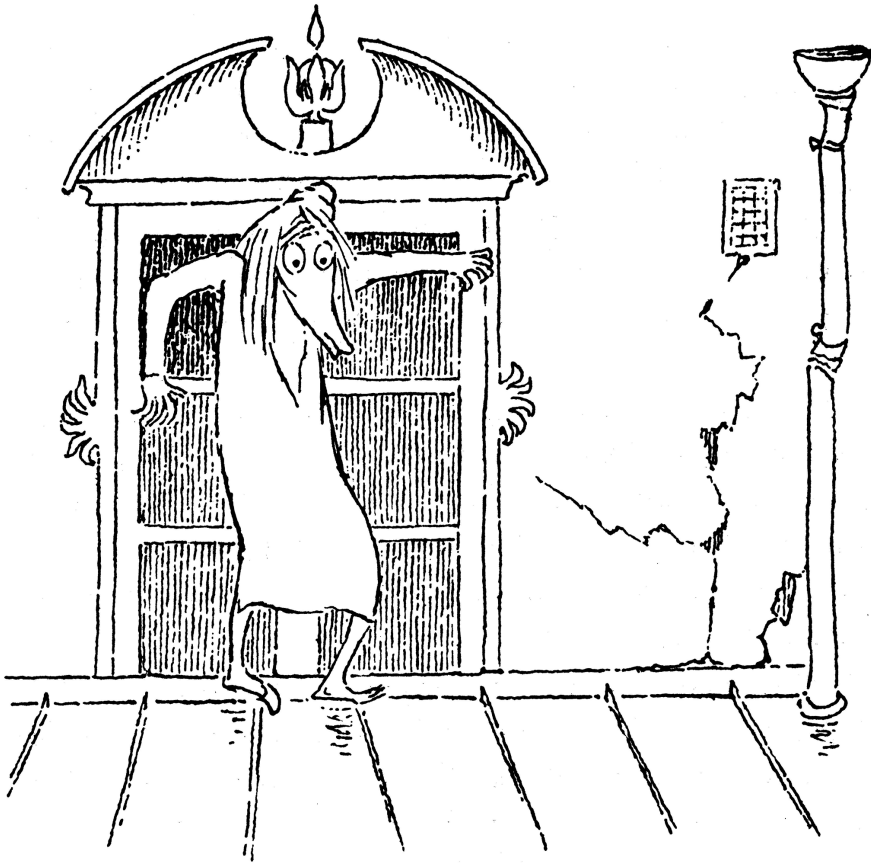
⁷ For Jansson's painting titled *Family* (1942), see, Willis (2017).

⁸ This Finnish term “marras” has the same Indo-European roots as the Latin “mors” and “mori”, the French “mort” and “mourir” and the English “mortal” (Ikonen and Kulonen 1995). For a natural scientific account of this life form, see, Bone (2011, 2018).

A sample of this hidden life is what triggers Fillyjonk's desperation in the first place and sets off a series of events that eventually brings her to the journey:

On Thursday in November it stopped raining and Fillyjonk decided to wash the windows in the attic. She heated some water in the kitchen and sprinkled a little soap into it, but only a little, then she carried the bowl upstairs, put it on a chair and opened the window. Then something came loose from the window-frame and fell close to her paw. It looked like a little bit of cotton fluff but Fillyjonk knew immediately what it was; it was a horrid chrysalis and inside it was a pale white caterpillar (Jansson 1970, 25).

The type of entity that provokes shivering disgust in Fillyjonk is not a natural scientific object but an experiential thing, given in straightforward perception. Caterpillars, “[m]oth-larvae, spiders, centipedes” (Jansson 1970, 163), and all



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other “creeping or crawling things” do not stand out in the visual field on the basis of their inner composition or their origin but are spotted by their ways of moving and resting. So, what elicits horror here is not a biological species, conceptualized, recorded, classified and theorized by the scientist, but a specific type of movement that is given in straightforward perception and that stands out from goal-directed progression as well as from determined locomotion.

This difference between perceptually demarcated categories and natural scientific concepts of life is thematized in Jansson’s book by the contrast between Fillyjonk’s horror-struck disgust and the detached descriptions of the old natural historical treatise that Toft patiently studies – without understanding much:

“As we intimated earlier,” Toft read, “this curios species gathered its energy from the electrical charges which regularly accumulated in those elongated valleys and illuminated the night with their white and violet light. We can picture to ourselves the last of this virtually extinct species of Nummulites gradually rising to the surface, struggling towards the boundless swamps of the rain-drenched forest where the lightning was reflected in the bubbles rising from the ooze, and finally abandoning its original element” (Jansson 1970, 81).

On the one hand, we have a perceptual type that inflicts immediate repulsion and shakes the whole person, body and soul, and on the other hand, we have a scientific category that stimulates curiosity and triggers the intellect. Fillyjonk wrenches in horror while Toft investigates without any recognizable emotion (cf. Heinämaa 2018, 534–540).

To understand the difference between these two attitudes, and the structure of the emotional rejection of strange life forms given in straightforward perception, I will in the next two parts of the essay develop a phenomenological account of disgust. I will first introduce two influential discourses on aversive feelings, Julia Kristeva’s theory of abjection and Jean-Paul Sartre’s analysis of the slimy. I argue, however, that even though Kristeva’s and Sartre’s accounts both help in distinguishing disgust from fear and anxiety, they are not able to illuminate the complexity of the emotion in its whole depth. In order to get at the core of the experience of disgust, I turn to an older source, to Aurel Kolnai’s phenomenological inquiries into emotions of aversion, and argue that they offer a more detailed account of the intentional structure of disgust.

My ultimate aim is to use Kolnai’s phenomenology of disgust to explicate the role of the autumn forest in Jansson’s story. For this purpose, Kolnai’s account needs to be developed further with new insights drawn from contemporary phenomenology of perception and movement. This elaboration is crucial, I contend, if we want to make sense of the whole variety of disgusting

phenomena and capture the associative links between them. The resulting analysis, combining Kolnaiean insights with present-day phenomenology of perception, allows us to shed light on the role of two crucial events in Jansson's story: the party and the clean-up.

3 The abject and the slimy

For contemporary readers, the most obvious framework for making sense of the descriptions that Jansson gives of the undergrowth of the autumn forest in *Moominvalley in November* is probably Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection. This source is not just suggested by the personal historical fact that Jansson wrote her book during the months of her mother's fatal sickness and death but more importantly by her depiction of the forest as an ambiguous existence, between life and death.

In her *Powers of Horror (Pouvoirs de l'horreur 1980)*, Julia Kristeva introduces the concept of abjection in order to account for certain aspects of our emotional lives that bear traces of our pre-verbal existence before personal individuation and identity-formation in a linguistic community.

The emotional reactions that Kristeva describes by the concepts of abject and abjection are not distinguished by their strength; they range from mild discomfort and disgust that we may feel toward everyday material elements, for example waste and bodily fluids, to the deep horror or terror that during the night may awaken us in a wordless cry.⁹ What distinguishes this category of negative emotional reactions from others, from fear and anxiety for example, is not the intensity but the intentional structure and the genesis of the experience.

Kristeva then argues that abjection and emotional reactions to abject things and processes must be distinguished from the terror of death and from the anxiety caused by the realization of our own mortality.¹⁰ What is at issue is not death as such but the borderline between life and matter, and our task of

⁹ In Jansson's notebooks, we read: "Daydreams, monsters and all the horrible symbols of the subconscious that stimulate me. (...) I wonder if the nursery and the chamber of horrors are as far apart as people think?" (quoted in Prideaux 2014).

¹⁰ It is important to make a conceptual distinction between fear of death, on the one hand, and death-anxiety or death-angst, on the other hand. Whereas fear of death is about a possible future event anticipated, foreseen and envisioned in intersubjective historical time (i.e. in third person perspective), death-anxiety or death-angst concerns my death as a constantly threatening but endlessly postponed and never transgressed experiential limit (i.e. in first person perspective) (cf. Heinämaa 2015).

maintaining this troublesome border and thereby coping with relations that are necessary to our existence as human beings:

A wound with blood and pus, or the sickly, acrid smell of sweat, of decay, does not *signify* death. In the presence of signified death – a flat encephalograph, for instance – I would understand, react, or accept. No, as in true theatre, without makeup or masks, refuse and corpses *show me* what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. These body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death. There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being (Kristeva 1980, 3).

In phenomenological terms, we can say that each case of abjection presents something from the world – a thing, a process, a behavior – that in one manner or other breaks or undermines the borderline between life and the non-living. This can happen when something traverses between these two phenomenal fields, or when something undergoes a transformation from one mode of being to another, or when something simply combines features from both realms in an unexpected way. Thus, the category of the abject is broad and includes many different kinds of entities, things and materials: filth, waste, muck, dung; sewage, cesspool; wounds, blood, pus; spittle, blood, urine, feces; corpse, cadaver, carcass, carrion. Moreover, abjection may also concern actions, types of action and modes of agency that are morally questionable: compromise, treachery, betrayal, traitors, liars and criminals. In Kristeva's *Powers of Horror*, we read: "The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite. The traitor, the liar, the criminal with a good conscience, the shameless rapist, the killer who claims he is a savior" (Kristeva 1980, 4, cf. 69).

All these phenomena tend to elicit thorough rejection that shakes the mind as well as the body. The example of cooling milk, introduced by Kristeva, illuminates the comprehensiveness of the affective-bodily reaction: "When the eyes see or the lips touch that skin of milk – harmless, thin as a sheet of cigarette paper, pitiful as a nail pairing – I experience a gagging sensation and, still farther down, spasms in the stomach, the belly; and the organs shrivel up the body, provoke tears and bile, increase heartbeat, cause forehead and hands to perspire" (Kristeva 1980; 3; cf. Arya 2014).

On psychoanalytical and semiotic grounds, Kristeva argues that abjection is always ambivalent. The main experiential component is a clear rejection or refusal of the abject thing or process but this is always accompanied by a peculiar fascination which is foreign to anxiety, fear and anger. On the one hand, we turn away from and take distance from the abject but, on the other hand, it draws and attracts us. We rebuff it but at the same time we feel an alluring force that resides in it. Thus, we do not take distance from the abject in

order to simply leave it behind, but rather to establish a proper boundary between ourselves and it.

In Kristeva's account, this duality and ambivalence bears traces of our pre-verbal struggle for identity and differentiation, more concretely, for separation from our bodily proximity with our caretakers, paradigmatically from the maternal body. Before all social roles, before any marked position in the symbolic system, and already before any verbal and conceptual tools are available to us, we as developing human beings make efforts to break the vital strings and contours that sustain our early existence. Thus understood, abjection involves a non-conceptual bodily memory or trace of this primary struggle:

The Abject confronts us (...) with our earliest attempts to release the hold of maternal entity even before ex-isting outside of her (...). It is a violent, clumsy breaking away, with the constant risk of falling back under the sway of power as securing as it is stifling (Kristeva 1980, 13).

A Kristevaeian reading thus suggests that the autumn forest, as depicted by Jansson in *Moominvalley in November*, would be an image of the mother's body, or rather an immemorial trace of its proximity; and correspondingly, the book itself would be a gesture of mourning, similar to Marguerite Duras' *The Lover* (1984) and *Hiroshima mon amour* (1960) (Kristeva 1987, Ch. 8, 218ff.).

I would like to suggest, however, that something different, and more, is involved in Jansson's narration and in the imagery of her text. In order to get to this point, I propose a short excursion into the intellectual history of emotions in the period around the two world wars.¹¹ We will see that two earlier contributions help to uncover the complex intentionality of the emotion of disgust and to delineate the core phenomenon in its concreteness.

One of Kristeva's philosophical sources in the theorization and explanation of the in-between character of abject phenomena is Sartre's *Being and Nothingness (L'être et le néant)* (1943). Kristeva does not draw directly from Sartre's account but she inherits Sartrean insights through one of her central sources. This is Mary Douglas's anthropological classic *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (1966), which deals with the cultural boundaries between purity and impurity, from the dirty and polluted to the defiled, the mixed and the tabooed.

In chapter 2, titled "Secular Defilement", Douglas introduces the concepts of anomalousness and ambiguity by reference to Sartre's analysis of the slimy (*visqueux*), as follows: "When something is firmly classed as anomalous, the outline of the set in which it is not a member is clarified. To illustrate this, I

¹¹ On Jansson's early political cartoons during World War II, see, Willis (2017).

quote from Sartre's essay on stickiness. Viscosity, he says, "repels in its own right, as a primary experience. (...) The viscous is a state half-way between solid and liquid. It is like a cross-section in a process of change. It is unstable but it does not flow. It is soft, yielding and compressible. There is no gliding on its surface. Its stickiness is a trap, it clings like a leech (...)" (Douglas 1966, 39).

Douglas' reference is to Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*, to its very last sections, in which Sartre sketches a new philosophical approach that he calls "the psychoanalysis of things" (*psychanalyse des choses*). Sartre is not concerned with psychological images, memories or phantasies of individual persons nor with social-cultural distinctions, but aims at capturing modes of being that belong to things themselves as they are given in experience. His inquiry is not meant as an analysis of our subjective impressions or of intersubjective conventions but purports to explicate objective meanings of material things and processes constituted in experiences (Sartre 1943; 764–766; cf. Dali 1932).¹²

To motivate and concretize his "psychoanalysis of things", Sartre develops an exemplary inquiry into the element of slime and the quality of the slimy. The inquiry confronts us with a type of repulsion characteristic of different kinds of experiences. The objects¹³ of these experiences vary from concrete items to abstract entities, from material things to mental states. "A handshake is slimy, a smile is slimy, a thought and a feeling can be slimy", Sartre states (1943, 770). The category covers a whole range of repugnance directed at evasive and sticky things: pitch, gum, tar, honey, syrup and melted sugar, "oysters and raw eggs"; snails, leaches, fungi and mollusks; bogholes and quick sand; liars, weaklings and deceivers – everything "base" (Sartre 1943, 770–773).

At the end of his analysis of the slimy, Sartre summarizes his results by stating that slime is "a substance between two states," an intermediate mode of being between solidity and fluidity. Thus characterized, slime is a coagulating liquid that has started to solidify, has lost its quickness and its freely flowing character, but has not yet reached the firmness and rigidity of solid objects. It is

¹² Sartre is here indebted most importantly to Gaston Bachelard's Jungian analysis of the four main elements of prescientific thinking, water, air, earth and fire.

¹³ I use the term intentional "object" here in its technical phenomenological sense that also covers ambiguous phenomena, the meanings of which cannot be named, conceptualized or defined by experiencing subjects. Thus, also the abject, as characterized by Kristeva, can be studied as an intentional object in this sense, despite Kristeva's Freudian and Lacanian formulations: "The abject is not an ob-ject facing me, which I name or imagine. Nor is it an ob-jest, an otherness ceaselessly fleeing in a systematic quest of desire. (...) The abject has only one quality of the object – that of being opposed to I (...) [W]hat is abject (...), the jettisoned object, is radically excluded and draws me toward the place where meaning collapses" (Kristeva 1980, 1–2).

a thickening, dense and viscous fluid, – “the agony of water”, as Sartre formulates it (1943, 774). As such, the slimy is yielding but deceptive. Like quicksand and peat, it sucks in anything that happens to fall into it and eventually relinquishes mere skins and bones.

Sartre, like Kristeva, stresses that the aversion elicited by abject slime must not be confused with the fear of death or with the anguish that we may feel because of our own mortality. Rather, what is at issue for Sartre is the horror (*horreur*) of an ideal, non-existential possibility that consciousness could be arrested by being and could lose the projective openness of its temporality. According to Sartre, this cannot happen: consciousness is free activity and projection by essence, and it retains its freedom even in embodiment and corporeality. However, the imaginary possibility of a stagnated state of consciousness remains threatening even if it cannot be realized.

Thus, Sartre and Kristeva both argue that abject repulsion must not be confused with the fear of death or with the horror aroused by dead bodies. So in this insight, Kristeva is indebted to the existential-phenomenological tradition, in addition to her psychoanalytical sources. The two theorists differ, however, in their accounts of the elicitor of this type of aversion. Whereas Kristeva’s Douglasian analysis suggests that abjection is elicited by any kind of transgression of the cultural or symbolic border between the living and the dead, Sartre argues that the paradigmatic case of an abject phenomenon is the specific mode of being that looms between self-governed free activity and inert matter.

However, Sartre did not come up with these ideas on his own but drew from another phenomenological source, published almost fifteen years earlier (Menninghaus 2012, 363). This is Aurel Kolnai’s treatise *On Disgust (Der Ekel)* from 1929. The essay had considerable influence on European literature and arts between the two world wars. We can find references to and traces of its analyses and interpretations across the fields of visual and literary arts of the twentieth century, starting with Salvador Dali’s and Luis Bunuel’s film *The Andalusian Dog* (1929) and re-emerging in Sartre’s existential psychoanalysis and in Georges Bataille’s working notes.¹⁴

My aim here is not to suggest any historical connections of influence between Jansson and these sources. Rather, I want to argue that with the help of Kolnai’s analyses, we can further illuminate Jansson’s insight into the problematics of life and death. More specifically, I want to summarize Kolnai’s main results and elaborate on them by means of contemporary phenomenology of perception, in order to get clear about the role of the autumn forest in Jansson’s

¹⁴ On Dali’s interest in Kolnai’s work, see, Dali (1932); Radford (2004); on Bataille’s working notes, see, Margat (2000).

story and see how this image figures in the diverted adventures of the book's six characters. I will argue that the autumn forest is not just a setting for the events nor a mere emblem of the jettisoned characters of the story, "a landscape of their minds." Rather, the forest's undergrowth figures as an active life form that operates on its own principles and that the characters need to dispel from the house and from their mutual relations in order to establish authentic co-existence.



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4 The disgusting

The main analytical outcome of Kolnai's essay concerns the peculiar intertwining of life and death that characterizes experiences of disgust. What disgusts us ultimately, Kolnai argues, is the disintegration of purposeful life into extravagant proliferation or excessive growth. The intentional object of the experience of disgust is "surplus of life, [not] structured by purpose" (Kolnai 1929, 72). The phenomenon has two faces, so to speak: on the one hand, boundless

regeneration and, on the other hand, the inner tendency of life to collapse in superfluity (Kolnai 1929; 53–56, 61, 78–79; cf. Šinkūnas 2017; Knapp 2007; Korsmeyer and Smith 2004).

The paradigm here is the rotting, putrefying corpse, but Kolnai's account emphasizes that the focus of these experiences is not on the dead body as such but on the extravagant life that feeds on the body and multiplies without boundaries and directions (Kolnai 1929, 53–54, 73). Pullulating maggots and swarming flies are thus central to the imagery of disgust. They signal superfluous fertility, excessive vitality and unbounded energy (Kolnai 1929, 54–56, 61, 73). Bunuel and Dali capture the core phenomenon in *The Andalusian Dog*, in a scene in which a human hand, stuck in the door, is attacked by a colony of ants: first appears one insect, then two and three, but in the end the petrified hand is covered by the wriggling black insects. Baudelaire's poem *The Carcass* (1855) provides a verbal image of the same phenomenon: "Remember that object we saw, dear soul/In the sweetness of a summer morn:/At the bend of the path a loathsome carrion/On a bed with pebbles strewn (...) Flies hummed upon the putrid belly,/Whence larvae in black battalions spread/And like a heavy liquid flowed/Along the tatters deliquescing" (Baudelaire 1855).

As Tomas Šinkūnas argues, the core phenomenon here is not just the interconnection of two dynamic processes – directionless life feeding on death and death endlessly lurking in life – but rather the switch or flip from one process to the other, the verge or the peak past which one course turns into another: "In a matter of moments, it becomes evident to the subject, that behind the pretensions and boundless fluidity of [excessive life], the inanimate interior of the (...) object is hidden. Even if the disgusting object appears to be possessed by a desire to excessively multiply, even if it seems to be at the peak of its liveliness, it is in reality burning away last pieces of its own life force" (Šinkūnas 2017, 10).

This Kolnaean analysis of the intentionality of disgust further illuminates the crucial factor that both Kristeva and Sartre stress: disgust is not simply fear of death or dying or abhorrence of corpses; nor should it be assimilated with anxiety about one's own mortality. It is a more complex aversion that concerns disproportional intertwinements of life and death (Kolnai 1929, 39).¹⁵ But even

¹⁵ The complexity of the intentionality of disgust is dismissed equally by evolutionistic accounts and by cognitivistic accounts. Whereas the former conceptualize disgust as a purely sensory and quasi-mechanical reaction with beneficial functions (e.g. Rozin and Fallon 1987; Griffiths 1997; Rozin, Haidt and Clark 2008), the latter dismiss (and condemn) disgust as an irrational evaluation informed by false beliefs about magical causation or influence at a distance (e.g. Nussbaum 2006, 2013).

more importantly, and in contrast to Kristeva and Sartre, Kolnai's analysis demonstrates that disgust is not just about any kind of imbalance but is about a specific type of disproportion: extravagant, profligate and wasteful expenditure of life forces, behaviors in which the goals and the means, the what and the how, get out of proportion.

Kolnai's essay also further clarifies the complexity of the subjective side of disgust. We have seen that on the objective side of the experienced phenomenon, life and death pierce into one another in disturbing proportions. On the subjective side, the experience is correspondingly characterized by a specific type of ambivalence: disgust alternates between repulsion and attraction and is able to combine instantaneous, even violent rejection with persisting fascination. Kolnai calls "macabre allure" the force by which disgusting things and processes draw us while at the same time provoking our revulsion (Kolnai 1929, 42). On the one hand, disgust-elicitors command us to eject, expel and distance, but concurrently they captivate our interest and order us to fix our gaze upon them. We are drawn to inspect their minutiae and scrutinize their sensible qualities (Kolnai 1929, 39; cf. Knapp 2007, 524). As such, the disgust experience resembles desire or, better, it betrays "a shadow of desire for intimacy," as Kolnai formulates it (1929, 46). Alluringly, the object suggests that the subject could "lay hold of [it] either by touching, consuming or embracing" (Kolnai 1929, 43).¹⁶

These subjective aspects of disgust also figure in Sartre's and Kristeva's accounts, as we saw above. Both refer to the ambiguity or ambivalence of the experience. The merit of Kolnai's essay, however, is that it offers a detailed analysis of the intentional content of disgust experiences and thus allows us to realize how phenomena as diverse as rotting bodies, carcasses, insects, saprophytes, bodily excretion and human attitudes can all elicit a similar or same ambivalence in us.

What is it that makes sludge, snot, pus, gore and clot similar to spiders, maggots and fungi, and what connects such natural organic phenomena with the moral-psychological categories of spinelessness, sentimentality and unrestrained "over-clever intellectuality" (Kolnai 1929; 67; cf. Kristeva 1980; 4; Sartre 1943; 770–773)? Sartre and Kristeva both account for the unity of the category of disgust by theoretical concepts, Sartre by his metaphysical distinction between being-in-itself and being-for-itself and Kristeva by her psychological-genetic

¹⁶ This is echoed in Dali's manifesto: "Being connoisseurs of simulacra, we [the surrealists] have long since learned to recognize the image of desire behind the simulacra of terror" (Dali 1930, 276). See also Heinämaa (2006).

theory of primary separation. Kolnai, in contrast, keeps his account near to the phenomena and is thus able to provide a more concrete analysis.

Let us focus on insects, “the creepy-crawly things”, as Fillyjonk calls them. It seems to me that if we are able to spell out how the *perceptual* givenness of these beings resemble those of slimy substances, decomposing bodies and extravagant vegetation, then we get a better grip of the intentional essence of the emotion of disgust. I will build on Kolnai’s idea of disproportional and extravagant life but will add new insights from my earlier work in phenomenology of perception that clarifies the role of movement in the constitution of the sense of alien life (Heinämaa 2013, 2018). On these two grounds, I will argue that what is crucial to disgust is its type of movement or behavior witnessed.

The trouble with insects is not, as many cognitivistic and evolutionistic authors suggest, that they are considered polluting or contaminating (e.g. Nussbaum 2006, 2013; 183ff.). In Kolnai’s analysis, repulsion characteristic of disgust is fundamentally not triggered by any beliefs or cognitions about the harmfulness of these entities or about their causal role in the spreading of diseases and death – real or imagined, verifiable or magical (Kolnai 1929, 1998; cf. Charles 2004; 130; Johnston 2001; 184ff.). In order to be repulsed and disgusted by swarming flies, by pullulating maggots or by wobbly masses of spiders one does not have to have any biological, physiological or medical beliefs about these invertebrates or their powers. Disgust is immediately elicited by the movements of the creatures, given to us in straightforward perception (or imagination), free from magical notions about influence at distance and scientifically confirmed beliefs about viral powers.¹⁷ If it is not suggested by the percept alone, then no additional biological or medical information is able to elicit it (Kolnai 1929, 1998; cf. Šinkūnas 2017; 4).

But what in the movements of the invertebrate is disturbing in this particular manner that involves attraction? Ordinary language offers clues that help us focus on experientially crucial aspects. We have already used some terms to characterize these beings, pointing out that they “swarm” and “pullulate”. We have also seen that Jansson consistently characterizes them as “creeping” and “crawling”. When we add more verbs – such as “wriggling”, “buzzing”, “quivering”, “scrambling”, “fluttering”, “throbbing” and “pulsating” – we are able to detect a perceptual pattern.

Two aspects stand out. First, when we observe insects, for example bees or ants in “their daily businesses” – collecting honey, dragging food crumbs,

¹⁷ The etymology of the terms “viscous”, “viscera” and “virus” refers to the same root-form in Latin. The core meaning is a sticky glutinous fluid that has exceptional vigor and strength and may have uncontrollable and unpredictable powers.

cutting leaves or carrying their larvae from one place to another – we are usually able to detect aims and goals in their movements (Heinämaa 2013, 2018). But when we see the same creatures gathering in great quantities or swarming around a covered thing, their movements do not present any evident goals or purposes. Such a structureless aggregate is at the nucleus of the ant scene of *The Andalusian Dog*, but the same emotive content also informs the very last clip of Alfred Hitchcock's *Birds* (1963) in which the main characters cautiously get in a car at dawn and slowly drive away, crossing a bird-infested landscape.

Second, when we study such living creatures collectively as a mass their combined movements resemble those of glutinous liquids. The animal mass spreads slowly, like spilled gore or syrup, but it may also vanish unexpectedly in the ground and re-appear without warning. It is plastic like resin, and sticky like glue. Being able to split and divide it can invade solids; it is capable of percolating through porous surfaces, membranes and pellicles, and entering insides protected by integumentary systems. Most critically, such movements threaten the orifices and openings of the human body, and metaphorically it can also be said that they expose the “political body” (Sontag 1978; Sontag 1989; cf. Nussbaum 2006).¹⁸

On my interpretation, the connection between masses of insects and viscous liquids, crucial to the understanding of the feeling of disgust, is in their ways of moving and in the disturbing potencies that their movements indicate. The relevant movement gives itself as purposeless or as merely aiming at (self-) proliferation but at the same time also exceptionally vigorous, cohesive and unexpectedly morphing. Such movements are displayed by rotting corpses, bodily fluids, saprophytes, colonies of insects and loathed forms of behavior. What is emotively disturbing is unrestricted autotelic growth and extravagant behavior that uses life forces for no other end than that of maintaining itself.

On the basis of this interpretation, I would like to suggest that the phenomenon of excessive purposeless vitality lies at the heart of Tove Jansson's *November* novel. Most importantly, three central themes cohere here: the autumn undergrowth that surrounds the exanimate house, the six leftover characters who aimlessly buzzle in the empty garden and the “creeping and crawling things” that need to be dispelled from the building.

It is the decomposing forest, its strange undergrowth, that first and most concretely displays the structural qualities of disproportion and extravagance.¹⁹ But the very same gestalts of unbalance also appear in the behaviors of the six characters that arrive in the valley. They all act out of proportion, Fillyonk

¹⁸ Cf. Douglas' methodological verdict: “The mistake is to treat bodily margins in isolation from all other [cultural and social] margins” (Douglas 1966, 150).

¹⁹ Cf. Zamir (2011).

preoccupied with dirt and dust, Toft with an idealized (m)other, Hemulen with everyone's affairs (except his own), Grandpa-Grumble with past joys, Mumble with enjoyment and Snufkin with five lost bars of music.

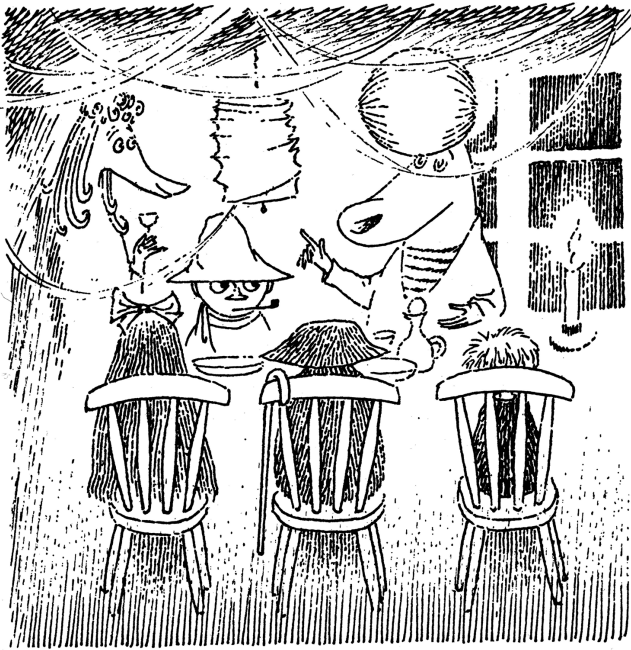


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The phenomenology of disgust sketched here allows us to realize that what is disturbing in Jansson's story is not just the house abandoned by the Moomins and occupied by spiders and dust, or the garden populated with fungal and saprophytic life, but also, and most importantly, the six main characters who compulsively pursue their ideals and obsessively search for imaginary alter egos. The behavior of each is disproportional and extravagant. Each one wanders in the desolate garden, alongside centipedes and spiders, without proper goal or guidance.

My phenomenological reading also suggests, by contrast, that we should pay attention to two collective events in the story that put the behaviors of each character in proportion and provide a shared goal for all: first, the party that is requested by the demented Grandpa and that allows each participant to display a fragment of something genuine, and then the clean-up task that follows next morning.

In the party, the six visitors are able to put their preoccupations aside and moderate their obsessions so as to communicate their aspiration to others. Mymble presents a dance, while Snufkin plays with his harmonica; and her long red hair flies in the air like a segment of sunrays. Toft reads from the enormous treatise that he has found in the attic, informing the others about the Nummulite, an electrical animal that in the course of evolution grew smaller but never lost its predatory manners. Grandpa-Grumble urges the party to follow him upstairs. When he opens a cupboard door and ceremoniously introduces the Moomin Ancestor, the others politely cheer the centenarian and refrain from pointing out that they merely see a mirror image. Hemulen reads his poem: “Oh what is life? ‘tis nothing but a dream/A vast and enigmatic flowing stream/Such tender feelings fill my heaving breast/I know not how or where they come to rest” (Jansson 1970, 145).



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Fillyjonk is the last to perform. She presents a shadow-play that she had prepared by cutting a silhouette picture of the Moominfamily in their boat. Last preparations are made by hanging a sheet over the bread-rack in the ceiling. Lights are put off; only one lamp is left on to illuminate the white cloth; and suddenly the lost family appears in front of them: “The boat glided across the sheet, over the sea, never before had a boat sailed so silently and so naturally, and there sat the whole family (...) sailing home” (Jansson 1970, 152).

The clean-up event on the following morning then joins the guests in the task of preparing the house for the winter:

At eight thirty-five, with the morning still quite shrouded in darkness, all the windows were flung open one after the other, mattresses, bedcovers and blankets poured out over every window-sill and a wonderful draught rushed through the house and raised the dust in thick clouds. Fillyjonk was cleaning (...) After a while the fun of cleaning became contagious, and everybody except Grandpa-Grumble joined in (Jansson 1970, 168–170).

The collective endeavor of cleansing leaves the house completely “bare and clean”, to be covered by the white sheet of the first snow. The liberating outcome of the event is that each participant breaks free from their obsessions and can begin a journey to themselves.

Several commentators have drawn attention to the image of the rain, central in the book (e.g. Ojajärvi 2007; Westin 1988). The two main lines of interpretation offered thus far develop the figures of washing, on the one hand, and crying and mourning, on the other. My suggestion here is that if we pay heed to the transformation that happens between the six visitors in the party – from disproportion to proportion – then we can converge these two lines of interpretation in a new account of the clean-up scene. Rather than just figuring as a joyful get-together, analogous to the party, the scene also pictures a burlesque version of a death-wake that combines the practices of lamenting and those of cleaning (cf., e.g. Utriainen 1998).²⁰ Water is thus needed in the narration both for mourning and for washing, and it operates in multiple forms, namely drizzling, dribbling, streaming, flowing and splashing, and in the end crystallizing into snow.

Finally, I want to draw attention to the fact that rain is not just a metaphor or metonym in Jansson’s story but is also the theme of the song that Snufkin is composing when the story begins. Five marvelous bars were lost at the end of

20 In “Ethics and artistic methods in Tove Jansson’s Moomin suite”, Agneta Rehal Johansson argues by means of Bakhtinian concepts that the category of the grotesque is fundamental to the whole of Jansson’s Moomin suite (2015). Cf. Kivilaakso (2003), 88ff.

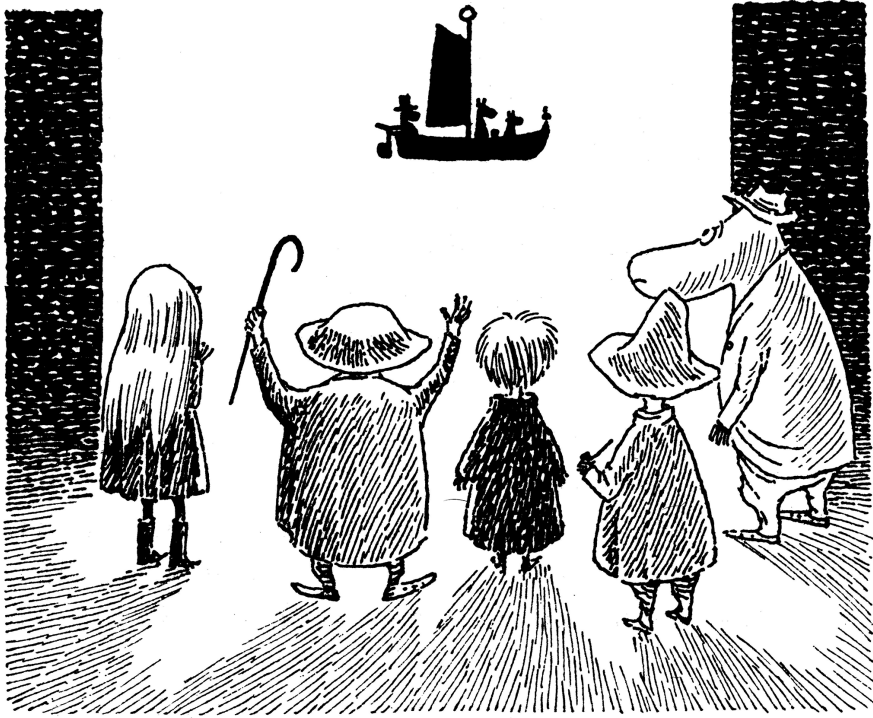


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the summer, and Snufkin returned to the valley to look for them. What has been lost cannot be found, however, and Snufkin has to give up the search, hoping that the bars would “come when they wanted” and writing other songs while waiting (Jansson 1970, 114). The marvelous notes have vanished from the valley, and Snufkin cannot do anything but wait.

But then something else appears.

First, five wretched beings arrive. They are very different from the household that left the valley, and they also diverge from the families that are remembered and imagined, episode after episode. They come across one another and, by grinding one another by friction, are able to form a novel constellation, and at the end they are ready to part.

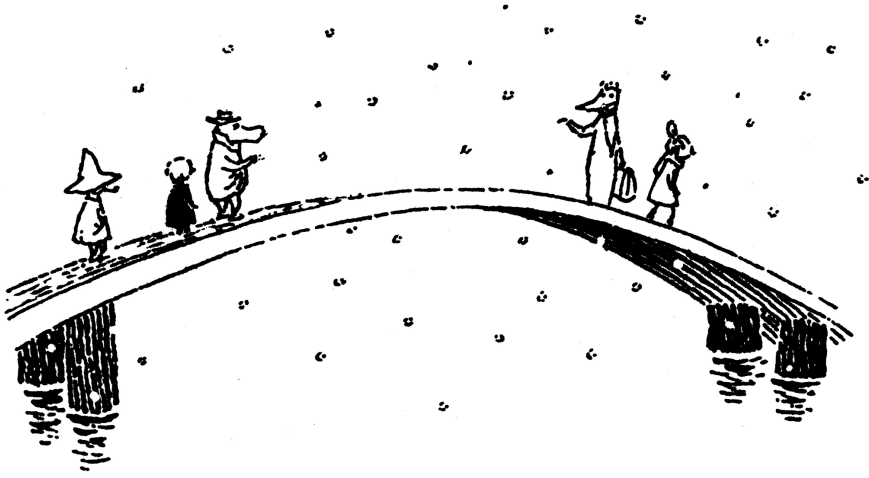


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After the feast and the clean-up, finally also five bars announce themselves. These are not the ones that Snufkin lost in the first place but are completely new, different from what he expects. They too, like the uninvited visitors, form a new kind of whole, one that does not have much permanence but still sounds beautiful and resonates strong in the cool winter air.

I would like to suggest that this is Jansson's final insight. Her last Moomin book is not just about death and mourning but is also, and more importantly, about survival and posterity and about the future that has to be contrived from whatever life offers us.

Snufkin stood outside his tent and knew that it was time to break camp, he was ready to be off. The valley would soon be cut off. (...) Everything was empty and clean, all that was left was a rectangle of bleached grass showing where he had lived. The snow would cover that up, too, the next day. (...) At first light Snufkin went to the beach to fetch his five bars of music. He climbed over the banks of seaweed and driftwood and stood on the sand waiting. They came immediately and they were more beautiful and even simpler than he had hoped they would be (Jansson 1970, 191).



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5 Conclusion

I have argued that Tove Jansson's *Moominvaley in November* involves three different character types: the members of the absent family, the wretched visitors of the Moomin house and the undergrowth of the forest that surrounds the Moomin house. The role of the undergrowth is crucial, not just in symbolizing the inner worlds of the visitors, but more concretely as a strange mode of vitality and agency that needs to be expelled from the living hearth of the Moomin house for the guests to establish authentic relations with themselves and with one another. I further argued that the emotion of disgust has a crucial role in the narrative, and that an adequate analysis of the content of disgust allows us to detect a crucial transformation in the relations between the characters.

For this end, I discussed three theoretical accounts of disgust, with the aim of distilling the intentional core of the emotion. I argued that even though Kristeva's and Sartre's theorizations illuminate the complexities of disgust, it is Aurel Kolnai's earlier account that allows us to see what is common to the phenomena that elicit disgust. The perceptual gestalt of the disgusting is exhibited by the undergrowth that surrounds the Moomin house but it is also manifested in the behaviors of the visitors who obsessively fuss about various matters, unable to form proper relations between themselves. In the attempt to break out of the circle of chimerical relations, two events turn out to be crucial: the party organized by the guests and the clean-up scene that follows the party.

In my reading, the main teaching of Tove Jansson's *Moominvaley in November* is not about death, loss or sorrow but is about the human capacity to begin anew from scraps.²¹

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