

LITUANUS

LITHUANIAN QUARTERLY JOURNAL OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

Volume 16, No.2 - Summer 1970

Editors of this issue: Antanas Klimas, Ignas K. Skrupskelis

Copyright © 1970 LITUANUS Foundation, Inc.



WINDOW-COMPLEX AND STREET-LABYRINTH: THE PROSE OF M. UNT AND E. VETEMAA

IVAR IVASK

University of Oklahoma

Although Stalinist critics in Estonia and arch-conservative critics in the West will continue to dispute it, there is really no comparison possible between the best literary production in Soviet Estonia during the fifties and the sixties. If the fifties seem to us as an endless socialist realist landscape, painted gray in gray, then the sixties display surprising splashes of color in poetry, prose and drama, although the general background remains rather drab. I know that the tendency in Estonia is to reduce exile literature to a mere handful of "progressive" names, while being all-inclusive with regards to their own production. Critics in exile try to retaliate by listing every single Estonian author in the West as important, while reducing the list of "uncontaminated" authors back home to a mere handful. Fully aware of these rules of the game in the literary-critical cold war between East and West, nevertheless I feel impelled to assert that the relative literary renaissance produced in Estonia during the sixties was primarily the result of a dozen writers of unusual artistic and human integrity. From the generation born between 1906 -1914, three poets have exercised an exemplary influence: August Sang with his first post-war collection *A Sandwich with a Kiss* (1963), Uku Masing with his *Jungle Songs* (1965), boldly published only in the West, and Betti Alver with her *Hour of Destiny* (1966). The middle generation of those born 1920 -1926 can boast again of 3 names who have had singular influence on the younger generation. Jaan Kross' first collection of verse, *The Coal Sorter* (1958), was the first daring swallow to announce the post-Stalinian thaw in Estonian letters. Artur Alliksaar's (1923-1966) impact has been twofold: first as the father of what can be called the Estonian theatre of the absurd with his play *The Nameless Island* (1966), and second through the wildly experimental, often close to surrealist practices revealed in his poetry, published in selection under the title *Non-Being Might Just As Well Not Have Been* (1968). Ain Kaalep's intellectually concise verse has probably left less traces in the younger generation of writers than his play *Of Idam and Adam* (1967) and his brilliant translations of, say, Lorca. After having paid due homage to these 6 important writers of the older and middle generation, we have to admit that truly original achievement of the sixties in Soviet Estonian letters was realized by 5 young authors born between 1935-1943: Arvo Valton, Enn Vetemaa. Jaan Kaplinski, Paul-Eerik Rummo, and Mati Unt. Strong impulses of renewal have gone out from these 5 into drama as well as poetry and narrative prose. You may have already heard about the contribution of Jaan Kaplinski to poetry and about the experimental theater of Rummo, Unt, and Vetemaa. As far as Soviet Estonian prose of the sixties is concerned, Valton, Vetemaa, and Unt have been the most widely read and discussed authors. I will omit in this paper the gifted short story writer Arvo Valton who has 4 books to his credit. It seems to me that the long stories or short novels by Unt and Vetemaa probe deeper and reach out farther into Soviet and universal reality.

Mati Unt (b. 1943) has so far published 4 stories "Goodbye, Yellow Cat" (1963), "The Debt" (1964), "About the Possibility of Life in the Universe" (1967), and "Murder in the Hotel" (1968). Enn Vetemaa achieved controversial fame first with "Monument" (1965) which was followed by "The Musician" (1967) and "Little Requiem for Mouth Organ" (1968). For lack of space and because Unt's "Murder in the Hotel" and Vetemaa's "Little Requiem for Mouth Organ" do not reach the level of their previous stories, I will exclude them from the subsequent analysis.

When approaching critically a literary work from the Soviet orbit, the questions we tend to ask are generally of the type "What does this story tell us?" and sometimes, however, much more rarely, the question is put in the form "How is this story told?" The first question leads us immediately to summaries of the plots, the analyses of love relationships, and possible social criticism. The second kind of question will produce a close view of the writer's style, whether to disparage him for influences of Russian upon his syntax or to praise him for having been able to sustain an idiomatic, idiosyncratic form of writing in his native tongue in spite of the pressure of Russian. Past experience demonstrates that both the obvious analysis of contents as well as of style can be slanted toward ideological ends. Thus there was in Estonia some

misapprehension about elements of social criticism, political guilt, and unaccustomed candor in the depiction of love relationships in the stories of Unt and Vetemaa. Estonian critics in the West again were of two minds with regard to the erotic frankness of these young authors, depending of course upon the age of the critic, yet were unanimous in praising the threads of criticism against the existing social political order they detected in these stories. It is easy to misinterpret any author as a reporter of political messages or a virtuoso of style, especially in the emotionally fraught atmosphere that needs must prevail in a literature split into an exiled and an occupied half. I for one felt an acute sense of dissatisfaction from reading all available criticism of Unt's and Vetemaa's stories published East or West, because none of it matched the particular experience I had when reading them. None of this criticism, I felt, had been subcutaneous, had tried to penetrate the creative structure sustaining the manifestations of style and contents. Could it be that instead of asking the questions, "What?" or "How?", the critics should ask, "Wherein" lies the unique vision communicated by the prose of Unt and Vetemaa? Far from wanting to split verbal hairs, this question aims at the essential structure of a literary work which animates and sustains it often without any conscious planning of the author. Mati Unt's 3 long stories, "Goodbye, Yellow Cat," "The Debt," and "About the Possibility of Life in the Universe" can be read as 3 chapters of an autobiographic novel that covers respectively the protagonist's last year at the Gymnasium, a year of search following graduation, and then his experiences at the university. The name of the protagonist changes from story to story, yet his great sensibility and critical cast of mind do not. Questioning the moral standards of his elders, the ideological position of both nationalists and communists, Unt's protagonist is basically an idealist who probes the relationship between law and freedom, sometimes venturing even into realms of metaphysical speculation. Integrity is always the final touchstone. Each story takes place against the topographically exact background of the old university town of Tartu. Unt's clipped sentences and manner of juxtaposing kaleidoscopically several narrative perspectives obviously owes something to Hemingway and Salinger, as does his hatred of cant. Unt pokes fun at petrified dogmas wherever he can find them (and there is plenty of opportunity).

Vetemaa's first story "Monument" was the tale of a ruthless sculptor-careerist, a party member, who after his schooling in Moscow returns to his native Tallinn. Soon Sven Voore is working on an important project for a monument to be erected to the victims of Fascism. Since the other sculptor, Ain Saarma, who works with him on the same project, is the true artist, Voore schemes to cheat him out of his share, and the monument is finally erected according to the plans of Voore and an old Stalinist professor at the Academy of Arts. "The Musician", Vetemaa's second story, is a variation of the same theme of careerist-artist versus the less successful man of steadfast integrity. It deals with the obsessive guilt felt by the poet Ruuben Pillimees who implicated his teacher in a speech given at the height of postwar Stalinist terror, accusing him of the terrible sin of formalism; his teacher dies of a heart attack when he is interrogated at night in his home. The poet Ruuben Pillimees cannot get over this incident, although other writers and party members manage to forget successfully even worse things. The story describes how the poet wanders restlessly from one bar or restaurant to another, a lost soul in Dante's Hell, for whom memories are almost more real than the actual present.

If Unt's narrative style could be termed stereometric realism, reminding one of a recently washed window in its sparkling clarity through which one can contemplate the streets of everyday Tartu, the starry sky, or the expanse of the Baltic Sea in Päänu, where some of his characters love to escape, then the style of Vetemaa could be termed magical realism on account of the labyrinthine meanderings of his stories both of which take place in the ancient capital of Tallinn. Vetemaa's ethically sensitive probings of man's conscience are played out against marvelously evocative descriptions of the medieval inner city, its Gothic churches and narrow winding streets. The time is usually evening or night, the pavements glistening with rain or melting snow, the whole a stony labyrinth. Although Tallinn is an old Hanseatic port city, the liberating closeness of the Baltic Sea is, strangely but characteristically, never mentioned. "The Musician" begins with the following sentences, "It began to sprinkle. It was a disgusting fine autumn rain. There seemed to be no sky any more: together with the rain, the evening descended upon the street, pressed the upper stories of opposite houses closer to one another, and when I glanced up, I had the feeling that I stepped along the bottom of a channel hewn into the rock". This imagery is sustained and further developed in the course of the story. Vetemaa connects it with definite references to the Bible, Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Gothic gargoyles, haunted places. In "The Monument," the talented sculptor Saarma exorcizes his childhood dreams of the devil walking along the edge of the world by trying to whittle his shape in wood. As a matter of fact, since Jehovah seems inevitably to be on the side of the victorious and mighty, Vetemaa's metaphysics have more of a demonological than theological slant. "Vanapagan", Old Nick (or literally the Old Pagan) may be outfoxed by the shrewd peasant while Jehova may not; the glad tidings of the New Testament seem not to have arrived in Estonia, according to Vetemaa. Thus there exists a definite existential tension in Vetemaa's stories between good and evil, innocence and guilt. The subconscious dimension of dreams and premonitions plays a much more important role for Vetemaa than for Unt.

Now, to acquaint the reader better with the movement and texture of Unt's prose, let me quote the opening paragraphs from his third story "About the Possibility of Life in the Universe":

"I was still shaking hands with friends, the wind rustled in the nocturnal linden-trees above me; the three of us had drunk four bottles of dry wine; all at once the train whistled. I started running and just made it to the coach. The doors snapped shut behind me, the engine picked up speed, and gradually the lights of the small resort town moved past the windows. Lamps hung suspended above the station platform. From one light to another, from another to the third, then nothing, just darkness. It was August. Wistful coolness and late summer fragrances wafted through the open windows. There I sat. I stretched my legs. My head was clear and light. I turned and looked at the window, seeing myself against the background of the night sky. A stupid face with tousled hair was moving across the landscape which hardly could be made out in the darkness."

Obviously for both Vetemaa and Unt life and art are dynamic, constantly changing realities, yet for Vetemaa its flow is in streets that seem like age-old riverbeds, while Unt envisions life in the ebb and flow of the sea of the exhilarating space

with its coursing planets. Vetemaa plumbs the inner realms of depth and darkness; Unt prefers to soar into the infinite expanse of space and light, even if in our quote it be nocturnal.

Dante and Dostoyevsky, Vetemaa's obvious favorites, come hardly to the mind of Unt's reader who readily accepts the latter's illuminating references to the Greek classics and Bach. When read from the point of view of inherent structure, Vetemaa seems to return again and again to the *topos* of winding city streets, depicted like strange riverbeds in a labyrinthine landscape to which the key of escape has been lost, while Unt is obviously obsessed with the window-motif, be it closed or open, looking out to the sky above the city or at the infinite sea.

The required brevity of this paper unfortunately does not permit a detailed substantiation of the above characterizations. For Vetemaa it is precisely medieval Tallinn which suits his kind of questing art best, an art which likes to involute upon itself, turning a disdainful back to the Baltic Sea which easily might have become a symbol of freedom and the lure of the far away. Yet every writer creates or, shall we rather say, secretes the peculiar symbolic topography provoked by his imagination. Hence Vetemaa, born in the port city of Tallinn, simply overlooks the symbolic potentialities of the sea right at his doorstep, while Unt, who has grown up in landlocked Tartu, quite naturally and easily finds the limitless sky when lifting his gaze from the streets standing at the window, or accompanying his characters to the resort town of Pärnu, right at the threshold of an altogether different existential reality.

It is almost disturbing how often Unt's characters tend to meet for crucial scenes at windows which they want to open frantically, if their cracks happen to be pasted over with paper strips against the winter cold, or if they have to remain closed by the simple authority of a school. The more one contemplates the complex variations on the window theme in the first 3 stories of Unt, the more one becomes convinced that the fundamental theme of Unt's art is the longing for absolute freedom in a world curtailed by relative laws.

What about Vetemaa and the symbolic world revealed by his first two stories? Quite obviously his main characters move on an altogether different plane from Unt's. One might say that they are equally trapped in themselves and their surrounding reality, yet without being even aware of the presence of windows, doors, space, and sea. The solution that Vetemaa's protagonists contemplate is therefore not an escape from themselves, but rather an ever closer spiraling movement to the very center of their own guilt. Vetemaa is preoccupied with this dark center from which all human action proceeds. The result is a labyrinthine, romantic, personal preoccupation with self, while Unt just begins from the self to expand in ever-widening circles as far as the hypothetic, cathartic possibility of life in the universe. The third story by Unt with this title ends with a girl sleepily watching the "magic window" of the TV screen long after all programs are over. Why? "Because if even I go to sleep, who will then capture that signal which is given only once during several hundred, perhaps millions of years?" Thus at least the theoretical possibility of escape into metaphysical freedom is entertained by Mati Unt. At the end of Enn Vetemaa's "The Musician", the successively constricting circles of a Dantean-Soviet hell tighten into a noose in which the guilt-ridden poet Ruuben Pillimees is left gasping for the oxygen of a paradox Christian brotherhood which he happens to find in the company of fellow-alcoholics.

Expansion or constriction, Bach or Dante-Dostoyevsky, freedom or guilt, window or street-labyrinth, Tartu or Tallinn: the 5 stories by Unt and Vetemaa, all too briefly outlined in this paper, represent a telling literary document of Soviet Estonian experience in the sixties at its most honest level. Could it not be that just reading these stories for their essential literary value reveals to us more about the spiritual climate in Estonia today than ideological-materialistic readings from either the left or the right? While the western critic will dwell gleefully on the fact that there definitely are careerist party members and that Soviet Estonian youth is dissatisfied, yes rebellious, his Eastern colleague will reply to such charges by stressing that these young authors castigate only certain negative aspects of their society and not the system itself... Both arguments can be proved and sustained on the superficial level of mere information. However, the moment we leave this most obvious level to analyze not only the salient symbols but the structural motifs and obsessive metaphors, such as the window in Unt and the street in Vetemaa, we get to the real core of these writers and the reality they illuminate and interpret for their attentive readers who have no ideological ax to grind. The closed-in, anguished quality of their living is revealed through structural analysis much more than by any ideologically slanted retelling of mere plots. There is no reason why young talented authors should not receive the same kind of careful, objective reading usually reserved as a posthumous honor to classics. We might learn a great deal about the age in which we are living, particularly about our home countries on which we claim to be experts experts, alas, detached from their living, first-hand reality by a quarter of a century.