

TRANSLATION AND LOSS: MATI UNT'S DOOMSDAY

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*What sorts of loss will we have to
take in order not to lose what.
LA. Richards "Towards a Theory of Translation"*

My comments on translation refer both to interlingual translation, the conversion from Estonian to English, and interlingual translation, the acts of interpretation and explanation within one language, which we engage in constantly in order to communicate. In thinking about my topic I asked myself various questions about the losses and gains involved in translation, the satisfactions it brings, the need for it, and its consequences. The latter particularly are far-ranging. For if we agree with Ivar Ivask's statement that "there are exceptional creative marginal literatures and insufficiently translated major poets in minor languages,"¹ we will translate on a large scale; and if we do, the presently hierarchic conception of Western literature, a conception of a plurality of single and autonomous national literatures of various strengths, will be displaced by a more egalitarian meta-national conception, which will take more account of the influence of translations and the fact that major literary artists have never been as national as the emphasis on the development and history of national literatures implies. We are now in a veritable age of translation of the various national languages into each other, and certainly, we should do our share to see that the Baltic languages are included in this exchange. We must do so particularly because finally it is probably true, as Walter Benjamin once said, that criticism is a lesser factor in the continued life of literary works than translation ².

Translating Mati Unt with *Mardi Valgema*³ was essentially an experience of unimpeded, tensionless transference from Estonian into English. There were hardly any special linguistic features that could not be reproduced, nor had any particular influences of literary history or style to fall away. Unt is rich in allusions to other writers and texts in other languages, but these are most often in the form of direct or indirect quotation and recapturable in translation. Unt's sensibility may seem simply to flow into English because he has looked to English models to modernize Estonian (Hemingway, for one, was a strong early influence) and because his aesthetic or poetic is largely postmodern and meta-national. *Doomsday* is a typically modern drama in so far as the language is not only extremely sparse and plain but intentionally trivial and anti-literary, and the actions and gestures communicate more than the words.

One could say that Unt's high degree of translatability made us miss the real challenge of translation: the encounter with the untranslatable. Untranslatability preserves, as George Steiner has argued, our instinct for privacy and territory, our need for concealment and secrecy ⁴. The untranslatable makes one more aware of the foreignness of languages among each other — of their essential alienisms and strangeness. Translatability, however, expresses the central reciprocal relationship between languages and the impulse of communication, which cancels foreignness. Translatability is somehow like criticism in its ideal form. For whereas criticism is normally an experience of adding to the original and, inevitably, verbose, translation, when it runs smoothly, is a perfect, silent transference of meaning, implicit and almost involuntary.

These problems of concealment and communication, translatability and untranslatability, nationalism and meta-nationalism, which are part of the theory of translation, recur when we speak about interpretation.

Doomsday begins as a very conventional and realistic bourgeois drama, which Unt gradually transforms and leaves into a new mixture of realism and fantasy. At first he projects us out of that bourgeois scene by letting the characters converse about fanciful and abstract possibilities. Albert talks about his belief in cosmic visitors and Aili about her fantasy of making a documentary film of herself in the nude for future reference. Such spurts of idle imagination precipitate the play, but are quickly censored by the others on stage. The group as a whole seems psychologically too fearful, inhibited, and serious to

be receptive to play of any kind. A senile grandfather contributes a sense of dislocation in space and time as he dozes on and off, oscillating between the first and second World Wars. He repeatedly inquires after the time and the identity of the actors. At the end of the play, hearing a shot, he wakes up, asking: "Are the Germans retreating?" ⁵ His references to Christ and the Book of Revelation also give us the title of the play and its absurdist apocalyptic dimension. None of the characters are very firmly anchored in present reality and all are very noticeably not active. They are passive and passively waiting for something, and the degree of the passivity of each is an exact measure of his or her sense of valuelessness. Thus the retired father of the family is waiting for a telegram and recognition, the grandfather for his daughter's confession that forty years ago she had stolen a silver monogram and had lied about not doing so, and this daughter for her own daughter's wedding. To Ingo, the fiancé of the young daughter, it is all the same who or what they are waiting for, Jesus Christ or visitors from outer space. His indifference expresses that of everyone else in the play (despite their posture of waiting), and makes also their ⁵ *Doomsday, Modern International Drama*, 63. reality appear valueless. The theme of passive waiting interacts with a sense of approaching death, introduced into the play right at the opening, and reinforced when all the characters join in playing a parlor game in which one has to be able to name a round object when a ball is thrown at one or play dead. "How long do we have to play dead?" one of the characters asks. The question resonates in the drama.

By this time Unt has loosened the boundaries of the real and unreal, the past and the future, sufficiently to allow for the next event. German soldiers in Nazi uniforms enter on stage, in the established definitionlessness, loss, and confusion, they could indeed momentarily be visitors from outer space, devils or saviors from the past, or simply robbers or actors. Their entry is the central episode of the play. It touches upon an old political wound and ambivalence of Estonia. Yet, the historical episode is recent enough for everyone to experience it as a bold, aggressive theatrical event. Compared to the shock of reliving that decisive and momentous experience, everything else is anti-climatic.

The denouement becomes an active process of debasement and trivialization. Presents arrive for the retired father: a two foot long toy car and a plaster cast of the Venus de Milo—rewards for a lifetime of labor. He leaves the scene like a child, pulling his toy car behind him and with a valium to make him sleep. Now the mother is also reduced to a child: she confesses that she had lied. It is possible, for forty years. The closing underscores the feeling that the special characteristics of this unreality are debasement, emptiness, unreliability; everything is a lie or a fake copy. The unreality becomes strongly admixed with disappointment, as well as absurdity.

Unt, like most contemporary dramatists, is largely irreverent towards all that made up realistic theater: psychology, individualism, and empiricism, though not to the degree that we are used to in the West. One could rely on the common poetic to make the general critical thrust of the play clear. In this instance one would stress or even exaggerate all the absurd, unreal, trivial, fantasy elements in the play in order to accent ultimately the erasure of sure distinctions between history and fantasy, the fake and the authentic, the mature and the childish, the trivial and the significant. Or, to prevent the dispersion of the national and the unique that the stress upon the common post-modern aesthetic would encourage, one could turn around and stress the rootedness of these particular fantasies in particular social-historical-psychological conditions. The socialist context of the play, for example, establishes itself by numerous references, which could be stressed, No doubt, various narrow and, therefore, containing political and social interpretations of the play could be made, but only up to a point, for ultimately Unt never gives any answers. He erases distinctions to show how impossible answers are and how many there are.

The mixture of reality and unreality in Unt differs from that in Albee, Shepard, and Arden for example. One can accent the realism or the unreality. The former brings us closer to the distinctly national or "foreign," but I would be very hard put to say where, if ever, that "foreignness" becomes unmistakably Estonian ⁶.

1 Ivar Ivask, "Analogies of Light: The Greek Poet Odysseus Elytis," *Books Abroad* (Autumn, 1975), 627.

2 Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969),

3 The following translation of Mati Unt has appeared: *Doomsday in Modern International Drama* (Spring, 1977), 43-64. Forthcoming are *EMPTY Beach* and some short stories.

4 George Steiner, *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation* (London: Oxford University Press, 1975), pp. 231-2.

5 *Doomsday, Modern International Drama*, 63.

6 Finally, it would probably be more fruitful to address questions of this kind to a first-rate play.