

Published in *American Book Review*, Vol. 31, No. 2 (January/February 2010), p. 15. Reprinted by permission.

“Estonian Vamps”

Diary of a Blood Donor

Mati Unt

Translated by Ants Eert

Dalkey Archive Press

<http://www.dalkeyarchive.com>

212 pages; paper, \$12.95

by Jeff Bursey

Until early 2006, I rarely thought about, or encountered, Estonia. Certainly I'd known it from maps. Its abstract blot took on flesh-and-blood contours while living in London in the late 1980s, where I met an elderly Estonian widow. In 1940 she and her husband had been out of Estonia for a short time when it was seized by Soviet troops and incorporated into the USSR after a mere two decades as an independent nation. The young couple were abruptly dispossessed, and forever exiles; in 1989, the woman I knew believed KGB agents followed her. With the dissolution of the USSR, Estonia became independent again. This might have been all I heard about Estonian matters until Dalkey published Mati Unt's *Things in the Night* in 2006 in a translation by Eric Dickens (it was published in 1990 in Estonia). It was the best novel I read that year, and the year after, and has stayed with me. Wistful, full of offbeat events, and a gentle humour, it's also filled with remarks that directly discuss the fictionality of the work, and these are aimed at the reader to interrupt the conventional reading process. They show that though the narrator knows fiction is happening around him, nothing will stop him from stepping away from the ostensible plot and the doings of almost-characters when he wants to. Goodness only knows what the author may be doing also.

In his very good afterword, Dickens briefly discussed various things that go into Unt's fiction, as well as telling those of us to whom Estonia has been an abstract blot with an unfortunate history only recently redeemed about the figures that populate Estonian literature. One of them is Lydia Koidula (1843-1886), “regarded as the first Estonian woman poet of significance, also the first poet to express an Estonian longing for independence and freedom.” In *Diary of a Blood Donor*, Unt is having mischief with her legacy, expressing some insights into the USSR and its relation to Estonia, while wrapping all this up in a pastiche of Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) that borrows many of its characters and events suitably transformed (distinct from being brought up to date).

In the 1990s, *Dracula* often was taught to graduate students, and those students, when they became teaching assistants, taught Stoker's novel to the young minds under their care, and so it went. Television (*Buffy*, *Angel*, etc.), books made into movies (*Interview with the Vampire* [1976], and now the *Twilight* series), and free-standing movies themselves (the *Underworld* trilogy, for example), have made, it would seem, any recapitulation of its plot redundant. In Unt's retooling, there are both a Lussi and a Minni, as well as a Joonatan Hark, and a host of other char-

acters who recall Stoker's creations. One purpose is to bring the undead into the literature of 1990s Estonia, though the action takes place in 1986.

Diary of a Blood Donor begins with a crow, moves on to mosquitoes, a squirrel giving a "bloodthirsty stare," and much else in the way of imagery drawn from our stockpile of vampire myth and lore. Yet, one breath away from talk of blood is a sentence invoking Russian history: "The cruiser *Aurora* fired her guns on the night of October 25, 1917..." the night the October Revolution began. The boat is the destination for Joonatan, who has been invited to its home in Leningrad by Eduard, a mysterious correspondent. Readers of *Dracula* will recall not only that Harkness [*sic*] didn't return the same man from his jaunt to the east, but that vessels play an important part in getting Count Dracula to the west. Not much farther in lines from *Hamlet* are quoted--"Tis now the very witching time of night,/ When churchyards yawn and hell itself breathes out"--to be followed by these observations: "The same paper published a demand for all rapists to be castrated.// That spring there was a nuclear catastrophe in Chernobyl."

The next paragraph does not bring us inside the nuclear disaster of 1986, nor inside the head of editorialists demanding severe penalties for sex offenders. Instead, we are placed on a movie set as a battle scene is being filmed. The director demands something particular from a lackey: "'We need blood immediately! And I'll tell you, if I see that berry juice again, I'll smack you! It has to be human blood! Where can we get it? How do I know! A hospital, a slaughterhouse... We're depicting the tragedy of the Estonian people, the turning point in our history... and you're fooling around. Our tiny country! Our terrible fate! Get me blood!'"

So many tragedies, from the Prince of Denmark, to Ukraine (and other countries) being blighted by radioactivity, to Estonian history ("All our numerous invaders have made us a touchy people," the narrator drily remarks.), seem to be all of one weight here--or almost none, viewed from another perspective--yet the letters and shifting narratives show Estonia's subjective relationship to its vampiric master, Russia, as played out on the political, cultural, social, and literary levels. Unt ties vampire stories to the deathless poetry and pose of Lydia Koidula. When she died, she was buried in Kronstadt (site of a sailor-led rebellion in March 1921 against the Soviet authorities), but in 1946,*[sic]* her bones were reinterred in her homeland. Her husband Eduard's were not. A reader gets fed bits of this story through the course of the novel, just like Lussi and Minni while, in a diner, they're treated to a mini-lecture by a "maybe-teacher"--the narrator doesn't know, or maybe the author couldn't be bothered to attach a profession to his creation--during which he reveals that Koidula "'believed herself to be a Dawn Goddess, *Aurora* in Latin, just like the Russian cruiser that fired on the Winter Palace, beginning the new era.'"

We have here the fruitful mingling of myth, and history (which may be just tidier myths), and complete suspension of the conventions of writing. "The ambiguous relationships among the characters in this story give me a headache," says the unnamed narrator (yet another character). "Their spider web of associations drives me insane." It's one thing to use the materials found in *Dracula*, and another to reawaken, or instill in someone, historical awareness of Estonia's path by bringing together vampires, an acclaimed national figure, and the machinations of security services who are trying to deal with the presence of the undead. Unt deftly shifts tone, brings the reader into the work while exposing its fictionality, and presents ideas in sentences that spin and delight, that are clever and can pierce to the bone (but gently), or that bring about laughter. He balances every element so well that *Diary of a Blood Donor*, with its grim backdrop, is an absolute joy to read.