

Estonian Surrealist Ilmar Laaban and his Translations, with Particular Reference to Marie Under

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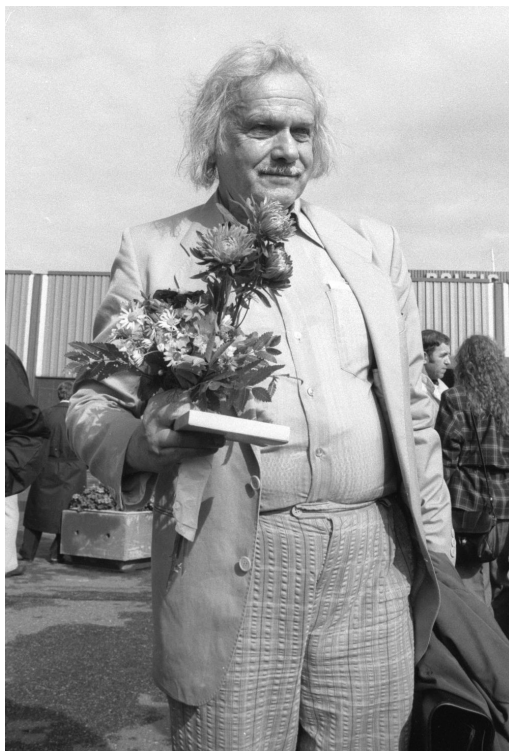
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It is often claimed that lyrical poetry is untranslatable for both external and internal reasons. Estonian linguist and a former resident of Ohio, US, Ilse Lehiste considers grammatical and phonological differences in languages as external reasons, but she also stresses the importance of semantic differences between words. The poetic value of a word contains its cognitive meaning, as well as its accompanying historical, literary and personal associations. Only a few primarily multilingual translators are able to render the multi-layered meanings expressed in poetry successfully into the target language. (Lehiste 1978, 305–306) Ilmar Laaban was one such translator who, being not only a translator but also an avant-garde poet, was able to overcome all linguistic barriers. The bibliography of Laaban's works *The End of the Anchor Chain is the Beginning of the Bibliography* (Tamjärv and Malin 2021) shows that he has published essays and multidirectional translations in many genres and fields of art. He has generally translated from Swedish, German, French and Estonian, but his archive includes manuscript translations from Italian, English, Finnish and Spanish. From French, he has translated the poetry of Guillaume Apollinaire, Charles Baudelaire, Jean Cocteau and Paul Éluard; from Swedish works by Gunnar Ekelöf, Elsa Grave, Erik Lindegren, Bertil Manmberg and Ragnar Thoursie; from German poems by Gottfried Benn, Paul Celan, Rainer Maria Rilke and Kurt Schwitters; from English works by William Blake, Lewis Carroll and Dylan Thomas; from Spanish poems by Federico Garcia Lorca and Octavio Paz; from Italian poems by Giacomo Oreglia and from Russian poems by Mikhail Lermontov (Malin 2004; 2021). Laaban's own multilingual poems and literary experiments have been published in anthologies and periodicals, although the majority of them, probably, remain in manuscript.

About Laaban's biography

Swedish Estonian exile poet Ilmar Laaban was an exceptional personality, a cosmopolitan and internationalist known as an avant-garde poet as well as a sharp-eyed critic of literature, the visual arts and music. His fellow Estonians in Sweden remember



Ilmar Laaban at Tallinn Airport in the summer of 1991. EKM EKL A, B-156: 632.

him as a bright charismatic personality and original thinker whose often purposefully arrogant ways hid an erudite encyclopaedic knowledge (see also Laak 2021, 13).

Relatively little is known about Laaban's life. He was born on 11 December 1921. The language of his childhood home was German, since his Latvian mother did not speak Estonian. His father Eduard Laaban was head of Tallinn Telephone and Telegraph Centre's Foreign Affairs Department. According to the words of Laaban's schoolmate Olev Mikiver, "It's not surprising that the home, where languages of the world and of the Baltic area constantly criss-crossed, supplied its son with polyglot language skills" (Mikiver 1992). Laaban's father, who was interested in music and languages, probably guided the education of his son, who was talented in both areas. Laaban took music lessons at the Tallinn Conservatoire. Specialising in philology, he started his studies in Romance languages at the University of Tartu during the German occupation of Estonia, and later continued them in Stockholm. However, he left university without graduating (Ojamaa 2022, 83). Laaban fled from Estonia to Finland by small boat in 1943. From Helsinki he sailed to Stockholm, where he settled and in the following decades developed into one of the best known and most multicultural Estonian poets and cultural figures. Laaban died after a serious illness in Stockholm on 29 November 2000.

Arvo Mägi, an exiled Estonian writer, has written that Ilmar Laaban

... introduces the newest currents in world poetry (above all French surrealism, Éluard and others) into refugee poetry. His collection of verse, *Ankruketi lõpp on laulu algus* (The End of the Anchor Is the Beginning of Song, 1946), was the first example in Estonian poetry of surrealist amorphousness and revolution of form, and one may add that it caused considerable sensation. His verse, which exhibits an international attitude and is primarily intellectual, attempts to combine the incompatible. Its imagery is chaotically shifting. Depending on the individual temperaments and inclinations of the readers, Laaban's poetry has noticeably influenced his contemporaries. (Mägi 1968, 82)

Laaban's surrealist collection of poetry *Roosi Selaviste*, published in Stockholm in 1957 with Öyvind Fahlström's illustrations, has had an even greater influence; the collection contained texts in Estonian, English, French and Swedish (see Laaban 1957). Both of these collections arrived in Estonia at the end of the 1950s. Even though they were circulated in secretly made copies, people read and cited his verses. I have claimed that Laaban's multilingual surrealist-language plays were a significant factor in the Estonian poetry renewal, which started in 1960 (Laak 2016).

In the Estonian cultural space, Ilmar Laaban is best known as a surrealist poet and the creator of the new genre of sound poetry. In Sweden, Laaban was also known as a critic and reviewer of music and concerts, art exhibitions and literary works. Although he can be classified as an Estonian diaspora writer in Sweden, Laaban's creative trajectory was much wider than the limits of Estonian national literature. Laaban positioned himself on the field of world literature rather than that of national literatures (see also Heinloo 2023, 296).

Laaban's translations into Swedish had a strong influence on the Swedish literary field. Particularly important was the *19 moderna franska poeter* (19 Contemporary French Poets, 1948) collection, in which Ilmar Laaban and the Swedish poet Erik Lindegren

[. . .] translated a selection of works by 19 contemporary French poets, mainly Surrealists. Many of these became available to the Swedish-speaking reader for the first time. The authors translated were Lucien Becker, Andre Breton, Aime Cesaire, Rene Char, Jean Cocteau, Paul Eluard, Pierre Emmanuel, Andre Frenaud, Guillevic, Pierre-Jean Jouve, Olivier Larronde, Michel Leiris, Henri Michaux, Saint-John Perse, Francis Ponge, Raymond Queneau, Pierre Reverdy, Jules Supervielle, and Tristan Tzara. (Malin 2021, 25)

When talking about Laaban's contribution to the Swedish cultural life, it has been stressed that he gave Swedish culture more than was acknowledged: "From the very beginning, Laaban's important role was to introduce international modernism to the Swedish public. He closely followed continental poetry, theories, music and the visual

arts created by the avant-gardists of the beginning of the century” (Olsson 1999a; b; c). Laaban had numerous friends and soul mates in the fields of Swedish and world literature, but he still kept up mediating Estonian literature, especially poetry, into other languages.

Jaan Malin emphasises in the foreword, “Player’s Actions”, to Laaban’s bibliography:

I have the impression that many people think that Laaban only had the narrow view of the surrealist. After having talked to Laaban face to face on this subject, listening to him speak and also reading his texts, I can assure you that this is far from the case! This is also evidenced by his articles on literature, art and music and the selection of translated authors (e.g. Rainer Maria Rilke, Octavio Paz, Mikhail Lermontov, Betti Alver, Gustav Suits, Marie Under, etc.). Laaban was a true surrealist until 1949 or a little longer. He did not turn his back on the surrealists, but that was no longer his priority. (Malin 2021, 28)

Laaban’s diverse literary explorations are also reflected in his manuscript heritage.

Laaban’s manuscript heritage

Ilmar Laaban’s personal archive (EKM, EKLA, Fonds 352) is among the most voluminous collections of the Estonian Cultural History Archives. It incorporates more than 1,980 items including manuscripts and typed and printed materials, which are today accessible to researchers via databases.¹ Laaban’s archive is also exceptional because of its multilingualism, including materials in Estonian, German, French, Swedish, Italian, English, Finnish and Spanish. His literary creative work includes poems, palindromes, sound poetry, limericks and visions (altogether 38 items), form the most valuable part of his heritage. The archive also contains manuscripts and outlines of articles, essays, lectures, presentations, etc. (altogether 313 items).² Laaban’s notebooks from 1940–1990 (137 items) contain extraordinarily rich materials – multilingual fragments, notes and sketches of his linguistically playful avant-gardist poetry forms, translations, essays, etc., in all genres, allowing us to experience the author’s creative processes from a very short distance (see also Laak, Labi and Nemvalts 2022, 124).

The archive contains 204 items of translation manuscripts (see Laaban 1945–2000). The largest number of translations were made into Swedish, but there are also plenty of translations into German and French. These manuscripts demonstrate Laaban’s efforts in searching for grammatical, but especially for phonologic, rhythms and semantic images, outlining the complexities of the living process of translation.

1 See <https://galerii.kirmus.ee:8443/ellen/fondideNimekiri.do>.

2 See <https://galerii.kirmus.ee:8443/ellen/fondideNimekiri.do>.

When researching Laaban's archive, we could ask three key questions: (1) which poets did Laaban translate and why? (2) what is the balance between his published and unpublished translations? (3) what metatexts explaining the selection of authors and texts for translation can be found in Laaban's papers and/or articles? These questions are for future clarification.

Translations of Estonian authors in Laaban's archive

The part of Laaban's archive that contains translations from Estonian literature was full of surprises. It includes poetry translations from 42 authors. We can see that his selection ranges from the poetry of the 19th century national awakening period, to (post)modernist authors who were his contemporaries both in Estonia and Sweden. Thus, being a surrealist poet himself, he translated, in a panoramic range, poetry from all the twentieth-century literary movements and -isms.

I wanted to find the balance between the published and unpublished translations of Estonian authors. It turned out that of Laaban's numerous translations of Estonian poetry, some of which were written by exiled authors, only the texts of 17 authors have been published. Eighteen of Marie Under's poems translated into Swedish formed the largest number of published translations of one author. These were followed by eight translations from the poetry of the Swedish Estonian exile poet Gustav Suits, a peer of Under's and, surprisingly, equally many from the works of Viivi Luik, one of the Estonian avant-gardist poets of the 1960s and 1970s. Seven translations were made of the poetry of Ivar Grünthal, a member of the younger generation of Swedish Estonian exiles; there were five translations of the poems by his peer Kalju Lepik; and four translations of poems by Juhan Liiv, a member of the Young Estonia generation from the turn of the 19th century. Considering the volume of Laaban's translations from Estonian and European literatures, it seems that most of his translations have remained in manuscript.

Translations of Marie Under's poetry

Marie Under's (1883–1980) poetry has a special place among Laaban's translations. Under had already become a classic of Estonian poetry during her lifetime. She attracted international attention as one of the most beloved poets of Estonian literature after the first decade of the 20th century, which continued to her death in Sweden. She fled the Soviets in 1944, settled in Sweden and was a leading member of the Estonian Writer's Union in Exile and the Swedish Writer's League, according to Hilary Bird.

The frank eroticism caused controversy, but the vivid imagery, fluid style, and discipline of her style made her the most popular writer of her time. [. . .] Her form is varied – free verse, rhyme and rhythm abound.

[. . .] Her last collection in Estonia, the elegiac and tragic *With Sorrowing* (*Mureliku suuga*, 1942) reflects individual and collective suffering as Under weaves the death of her mother into the death of the Estonian Republic. Two more collections followed in exile – *Sparks under the Ashes* (*Sädemed tuhas*, 1954) and *From the Edge* (*Ääremail*, 1963) both redolent with homesickness. (Bird 2018, 217–218)

Ivar Ivask, chief editor of the journal *World Literature Today* (founded as *Books Abroad*), published in Oklahoma, US, who had a warm and cordial 22-year correspondence with Under (see Laak and Kirss 2023), wrote in the anthology *Contemporary Eastern European Poetry*:

Marie Under is considered to be the most important Estonian poet. Her manifold oeuvre (some 400 poems) appeared in thirteen collections, from the first, triumphant, *Sonetid* (*Sonnets*, 1917) to the émigrée's *Ääremail* (*In Borderlands*, 1963), spanning a creative life of some six decades. The almost Goethean amplitude of her genius is best indicated through some of her own characteristic book titles, such as *Rõõm ühest ilusast päevast* (*Delight in a Lovely Day*, 1928) and *Hääl varjust* (*Voice from the Shadow*, 1927, composed concurrently, or *Ja liha sai sõnaks* (*And the Flesh Became Word*), her selected poems of 1936. Although attempts have been made to translate her vitally pulsating poetry into the major Western languages, she has yet to be truly discovered as one of the half-dozen leading women poets of our century. (Ivask 1983, 5)

Between 1945 and 1971 Marie Under was presented as candidate for the Nobel Prize 12 times.³

Laaban's archive holds the manuscripts of his translations of Under's poems mostly into Swedish, but also into German and French. Even the number of published translations of Under's poetry is larger than that of others. These translations are intriguing just in the context of Laaban's own image as a surrealist poet, since in the year of the publication of his first collection of poetry *Ankruketi lõpp* (*The End of the Anchor Chain*), he had also written a review of Under's first exile collection of poetry *Sõnasild* (*Wordbridge*, 1945) (Laaban 1946b).

As an example of Laaban's translations, I present here the manuscript of the translation of Under's poem "Ja langes üks täht" into Swedish "En stjärna föll", published in a Swedish-language poetry collection *Vigilia* (Under 1963), which attracted much attention in the Swedish media.

3 See https://www.nobelprize.org/nomination/archive/show_people.php?id=9443

En stjärna föll

Skamlöst ny gamla månen på himlen star –
 så mycket, som jag aldrig återfår!

Finns myt blott och skugga? Är sken vår lag? –
 Av en fågel i min strupe då väcktes jag.

Min förlorade stad, min förlorade stad –
 till dig är och var jag alltid åstad.

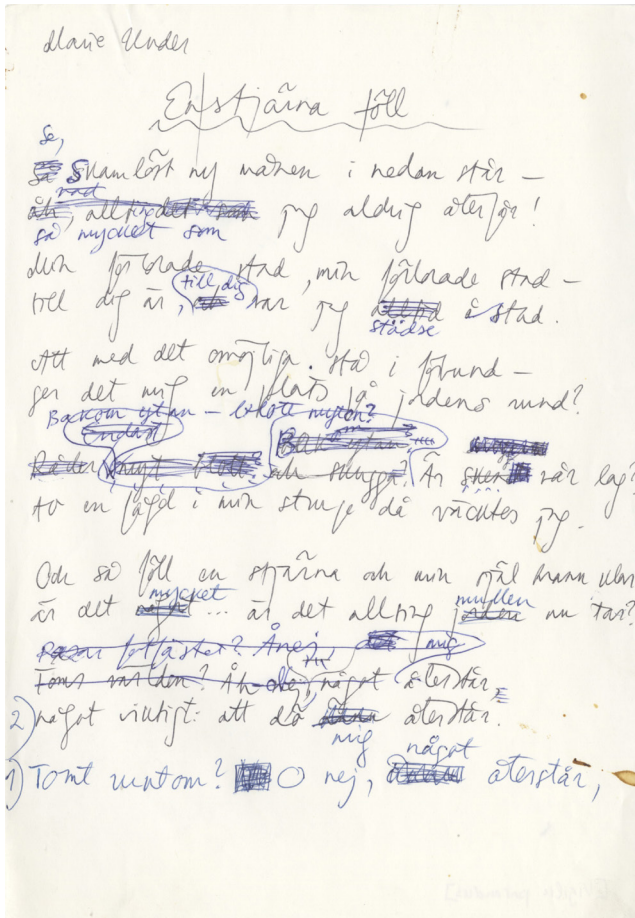
Och så föll en stjärna och min själ brann klar:
 är det något . . . är det allting mullen nu tar?

Att med det omöjliga stå i förbund –
 ger det en hemvist på jordens rund?

Rasar fotfästet? Nej, å nej: ännu har
 jag viktigt kvar – att dö har jag kvar.

I.L.

(Under 1963b, 73)



Ilmar Laaban's manuscript of the translation into Swedish of Marie Under's poem "And the star fell" – EKM EKLÄ, f. 352, m. 107: 5.

Ja langes üks täht

Kui jultunult uus on see vana kuu –
Kuid mis kõik on tagasivõitmatu!

Oh mu kadunud linn, mu kadunud linn –
Mida otsin ning alati otsisin.

Kes võimatuga on lepingus,
Kus on selle koht? Selle koht on kus?

Kas müüt kõik ja vari? Pelk päälispind? –
Ent siis äratas mind mu kurgus üks lind.

Ja nüüd langes üks täht ja mu süda lõi tuld:
mida jätab veel mulle . . . mida võtab mult muld?

Kas tühjusse haaran? Oh ei, aga ei:
Veel tähtsat jäi – veel surra jäi.

(Under 1963a, 28–29)

And a Star Fell

How brazenly new is that old moon up there—
yet so much won't return, for which I care!

O my lost city, o city I lost—
that I seek, always sought at such a cost.

He who has been to the impossible bound,
Where is his place? Where can it be found?

Is all myth and illusion? Surface glitter?
A bird awoke in my throat with a twitter.

And a star fell. My heart came ablaze:
what will earth leave me? What will it raze?

Do I grasp nothingness? Is all but a lie?
No, still the main task is left—to die.

(Under 1983, 7)

Conclusions

Translations of Estonian poetry in Laaban's personal archive indicate that he was extremely familiar with the Estonian poetry tradition as well as with contemporary poetry. His selection of authors for translation may have been based on his interest in different linguistic and phonetic worlds, even if he was able to deviate from them vigorously in his own surrealist poetry. Since the majority of his translations of Estonian poetry have not been published, we could assume that they might have been made to support his lectures on Swedish radio, presentations at literary events, papers at international conferences and tours in America and Canada.

Examining Laaban's manuscript archive we realise how much linguistic effort he made in mediating the poetry of Estonian and other authors. Clarification of his translation strategies would still require thorough research into his translations archive and manuscript notebooks.

To Sum up, Laaban's translations show that although his literary activities took place in the field of world literature, he had consideration for the national literary fields of Swedish and Estonian poetry. His selection of translated authors can fill gaps

in Estonian translation history. Laaban's translation heritage would undoubtedly be worthy of a separate chapter in such a history.

Translated by Marika Liivamägi

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