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"Reader, unbury him with a word": The Revenant and/as Evil in Elizabeth Kostova's *The Historian*

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This research addresses the universal question of evil through an intertextual focus between Bram Stoker's Dracula *as a traditional Gothic production and its neo-Gothic counterpart,* The Historian *by Elizabeth Kostova. Through investigating the relationship between two ensuing genres, it explores the understanding of human nature and its transformative capacity for evil in Gothic and neo-Gothic fiction, as well as protagonists' need, temptation and failure to exorcise the Revenants of the past. With a theoretical framework supported by Jacques Derrida and his concept of hauntology, the present research further revolves around revealing how the monsters of the (neo-)Gothic fiction function as the manifestations of history itself by analysing the way the past haunts humanity's present and future.*

Keywords: *Derrida*, *Dracula*, *evil, hauntology, Neo-Gothic, revenant*

1. Introduction

> "[…] to tell a story is always to invoke ghosts, to open a space through which something other returns, although never as a presence or to the present. Ghosts return via narratives, and come back, again and again, across centuries, every time a tale is unfolded*."*
>
> —Julian Wolfreys, *Victorian Hauntings*

An ancient question rooted deep in the history of humanity is in urgent need of being addressed for the sake of this paper: the question of evil. During the last century, scholars – of literature, philosophy, politics and many other fields – have inevitably mingled with the topic leading to a detrimentally-general conclusion that who or what is referred or categorized as evil is a long-ongoing discussion that may or may not be answered in our near future. An initial description of the word "evil"

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further perplexes us with its obscure and heavily-interpretable nature: evil is related to "profound immorality and wickedness, especially when regarded as a supernatural force"; it is furthermore "something which is harmful or undesirable" (Oxford Online Dictionary) and overall, "something that is very bad and harmful" (Cambridge Online Dictionary). This brings a wide variety of subjective notions into the picture and long before one decides to turn the pages of man-made dictionaries, some very clear pictures are likely to flash in our minds when the word is used. With these points in mind, the present study intends to compare not only two different literary manifestations of evil, Bram Stoker's *Dracula* and Elizabeth Kostova's *The Historian*, but also the two time periods that these texts were produced in, respectively Victorian and Neo-Victorian – or more specifically, because we're now in the Gothic realm, the Gothic and the Neo-Gothic. With a theoretical framework revolving around Jacques Derrida's concept of "hauntology", which was first mentioned in his book *Specters of Marx* in 1993, the present paper further aims to investigate how the monsters of the Gothic are presented as the manifestations of history itself with a focus being evil in Gothic and Neo-Gothic fiction; their understanding of human nature and its capacity of evil; the protagonists' need, temptation and failure to exorcise this evil and/or the past.

2. Derrida, hauntology and "time is out of joint"

"How can he be there, again, when his time is no longer present?"
—Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*

In *Speaking the Language of the Night*, Raducanu explains: "Fragmentation and a fascination with the forbidden are arguably among the most important characteristics of Gothic in literature" (2014, 9). This notion of trying to reach out to the 'forbidden' and embrace the obscene and the transgressive disposition that comes with even daring to speak of the specter and to let a specter speak in turn forms the general characteristics of what Derrida addresses as *hantologie*. The term "hauntology" is coined and presented by Derrida in his *Specters of Marx*, which involves a series of lectures during "Whither Marxism?" – a conference on the question of the future of Marxism held at the University of California in 1993. Using Marx's statement at the very beginning of *The Communist Manifesto* that "a spectre is haunting Europe – the spectre of communism", Derrida focuses on the very meaning of this spectral quality and suggests that the spirit of Marx and his manifesto, having the opportunity to revisit earth from beyond the grave, haunt us to our present day. With a significant wordplay, Derrida replaces "ontology" and

the superiority of presence with its near-homonym "hauntology" and the specter as something of an indefinable figure, "neither present nor absent, neither dead nor alive" (Davis 373). Derrida further explains that the notion of hauntology cannot fully function without a deconstructive process: since the "spectral logic is *de facto* a deconstructive logic", hauntology, then, referred as the closest thing we have to a *zeitgeist* at the threshold of the twenty-first century, is mainly described as a situation of disjunction in which the apparent presence of being is replaced by an absent or deferred non-origin, represented by the spectre, the revenant, the figure of the ghost as that which in itself connotes difference, iterability, trace and supplementarity (2002, 121). With the fall of the Berlin Wall and the demise of communism, Derrida believed that Marxism "would haunt Western society from beyond the grave" (Gallix 2011). In order to further elucidate the act of haunting and its effect on both the individual and the text in relation to the hauntologic discourse and its connection to time, Derrida makes use of Hamlet's father's ghost: upon encountering the ghost of his father, Hamlet, crestfallen and hot-blooded with the need to take vengeance on King Claudius, declares that "the time is out of joint – o curséd spite / that ever I was born to set it right!" (2006, 1.5.210). Time, always progressive and a linear concept that is perceived with a beginning and an assured end, adopts a quality of being broken and/or disrupted as a result of this hauntologic process that enables the spectral as an entity of the past that is unusually able to inhabit the present time. Derrida proposes that the return of the spectre as the revenant – since death as a concept halts the very existence of a being and the specter keeps its (non)existence in spite of it – marks time as "disarticulated, dislocated, dislodged…run down, on the run and run down…deranged, both out of order and mad" (1994, 20). By defying the temporal code and the natural sequence of events and reappearing where it should not be able to appear, the specter presents itself as the future, always to come, or which could come back any time. In his *Victorian Hauntings*, Julian Wolfreys explores this spectral reappearance of the revenant and its disruptive quality as follows:

> The revenant is quite literally that which is out of time, and defies time as well as the natural order. Where death is meant to put a stop to existence, the return of the dead marks a deeply unsettling and thoroughly unnatural turn of events…Revenants that cannot be defeated – in other words, exorcised from the present – always threaten to return and are therefore already a possibility and a representation of a future-to-come (2002, 28).

In this regard, the time itself functions as one of the major issues that stand on the grounds with the concept of hauntology through its quality of being broken or

disrupted. The revenants, in this case, arrive from the past and they appear in the present, but they "cannot be properly said to belong to the past" since "the idea of a return from death fractures all traditional conceptions of temporality": "The temporality to which the ghost is subject is therefore paradoxical, at once they 'return' and make their apparitional debut" (Buse and Stott 1999, 11). Consequently, Derrida's concept of hauntology presents itself as this "dual movement of return and inauguration", considered to be "a coinage that suggests a spectrally deferred non-origin within grounding metaphysical terms such as history and identity" (Buse and Stott 1999, 11). The nearly-violent act of awakening these ghosts of the past reveals creating the scenes of history from the past, and as Davis further explains, this hauntological process in fiction further represents a call to justice: the dead return and inhabit the present as revenants "either because the rituals of burial, commemoration and mourning have not been properly completed, or because they are evil and must be exorcised," or just like the ghost of Hamlet's father, "they know of a secret to be revealed, a wrong to be righted, an injustice to be made public or a wrong doer to be apprehended" (2007, 3).

3. Neo-Gothic and revisiting *Dracula*

Victorian people, the most modern and advanced of humanity that the world had ever seen so far in their time with their Industrial Revolution, Darwin and the theory of evolution, and further social and scientific advancements, took pride in what they had become. The Victorian society was strictly built around moral codes, the search for knowledge at all costs and the rules that were established for the fear of regression, invasion or losing of power and control:

> If we strip away the gadgets and fashions, Victorian England was not unlike the United States today. There was the same unblinking worship of independence and of hard cash; there was the same belief in institutions – patriotism, democracy, individualism, organized religion, philanthropy, sexual morality, the family, capitalism and progress; the same overwhelming self-confidence, with its concomitant…And, at the core, was the same tiny abscess – the nagging guilt as to the inherent contradiction between the morality and the system (Jordan 1966, 12).

The Victorian society as the centre of the civilized world created the first examples of the great Gothic fiction with a dire need to exorcise their demons: they put their fears in monsters coming from another time, realm or reality and they successfully destroyed them at the end of their stories, saving themselves, their country and

their future. In *Contemporary Gothic*, Catherine Spooner explains this sense of danger for the past, present and the future through the characteristics of the Gothic period. According to Spooner, the Gothic text presents the past as "a site of terror, of an injustice that must be resolved, an evil that must be exorcised" and it is not invested with idealism or nostalgia: "The past chokes the present, prevents progress and the march towards personal or social enlightenment" (2006, 18). In this case, Stoker's *Dracula* poses a similar pattern of anxieties for the Victorian people: Dracula's "ancient aristocratic bloodline/bloodlust" is the danger that "threatens the ruthlessly modern young people who seek to foil his evil plans with the aid of their typewriters, phonographs, train timetables and bang-up-to-date criminological theory" (2006, 19). It is in fact this haunting anxiety and the exorcising process that paves the way for its revisionist counterpart, *The Historian*. Elizabeth Kostova refashions the Dracula myth from a Neo-Gothic standpoint with her debut novel. One of the common characteristics of *Dracula* and *The Historian* is the epistolary format – *Dracula* includes letters, diary entries, newspaper articles, and even ships' log entries while *The Historian* is piled up of all kinds of letters, passages from academic essays and pages of information from history books. In *Dracula*, Mina Murray, Harker's to-be-fiancée, undertakes this recording and opens the book with a bold statement of reality: "All needless matters have been eliminated, so that a history almost at variance with the possibilities of latter-day belief may stand forth as simple fact" – Mina further claims that there is "throughout no statement of past events wherein memory may err, for all the records chosen are exactly contemporary, given from the standpoints and within the range of knowledge of those who made them" (1994, 9). While in *The Historian*, it is officially Paul's daughter, our unnamed narrator that makes the same claim in a "Note to the Reader":

> This is the story of how as a girl of sixteen I went in search of my father and his past, and of how he went in search of his beloved mentor and his mentor's own history, and of how we all found ourselves on one of the darkest pathways into history. It is the story of who survived that search and who did not, and why. As a historian, I have learned that, in fact, not everyone who reaches back into history can survive it. And it is not only reaching back that endangers us; sometimes history itself reaches inexorably forward for us with its shadowy claw [...] To you, perceptive reader, I bequeath my history (2005, vii).

The possibility of any kind of doubt in the reader, therefore, is eliminated even before both novels start. However, there still stands a major difference between two accounts: while Mina makes do with only confirming the truth of the events, our unnamed narrator, 'as a historian', goes on to warn us about some aspects of

history with an approaching feeling of danger. This danger of history's "reaching inexorably forward for us with its shadowy claw" is one of the focal points that the novel serves to its reader and this point is perseveringly emphasized by Kostova's descriptions and the details about the history of Dracula's ancestry.

Both Stoker and Kostova, albeit with different literary styles, admitted that they were heavily inspired by Vlad Ţepeş of Wallachia, the historical figure with a widely-recognized reputation of his uniquely ruthless methods in war. Vlad III takes the name Dracula (meaning "son of Dracul", deriving from the Latin word *draco* meaning dragon) when his father joins the Order of the Dragon, a group founded by the Roman Emperor Sigismund in order to defend Christian Europe against the Ottoman Empire. Vlad Dracula and his brother are taken by Sultan Mehmet II as collateral to secure their father's loyalty to the Ottoman Empire, where some sources specify that Vlad the Impaler get a first taste of his signature method by watching the Ottoman ways of torturing and impaling people. The dragon is an important symbol that represents Dracula himself in *The Historian*. Both authors take great notice to make Dracula's past life's history glaringly visible in their novels, but Elizabeth Kostova quite accurately portrays her Dracula as the embodiment of the historical figure of Vlad Ţepeş of Wallachia:

> He had long, curling, dark hair, which fell around his shoulders in a short mantle… He wore a peaked cap of gold and green collar laced high under his large chin. The jewel on his brown and the gold threads in his collar glittered in the firelight. A cape of white fur was drawn around his shoulders and pinned with the silver symbol of a dragon… His mouth, I saw now, was closed in a hard smile, ruby and curving under his wiry, dark mustache (2005, 808).

Dracula, on the contrary with Stoker's "tall old man, clean-shaven save for a long white moustache, and clad black from head to foot, without a single speck of colour about him anywhere" (25), is more of a glorious Wallachian prince more than a "Transylvanian noble" in *The Historian*. His clothing alone is so "extraordinary" that the narrator "felt as frightened of it as I did of his strange undead presence" (Kostova 2005, 809). However, this does not arise as the only difference between the two revenants. Stoker feeds on Britain's fear of colonization while he equips his Vlad with a very specific purpose: spreading vampirism through the country and get new blood that is necessary for his regeneration. He mainly targets young, defenceless women, turns them into vampires, and uses them as his minions. Apart from the first time Dracula is introduced to the reader in the first chapter, he is either done with the feeding or caught in the middle of it and blood is always included in the scene. This is also

ironically what the narrator, a teenage high-school girl at the time, desperately comes to realize while she is gathering information about Vlad III in a library:

> But there was one aspect of the story that haunted me after each session, after I'd put the book back on its shelf, carefully noting the page number where I'd left off. It was a though that followed me down the steps of the library and across the canal bridges, until I reached the door. The Dracula of Stoker's imagination had a favorite sort of victim: young women (Kostova 2005, 79).

What does then Kostova's Dracula want? The reader, after pages and pages of chasing across different churches, cities, countries and eventually continents, gets to have a glance of Dracula himself only through the end of the novel. The only time we somehow see him stained with blood is from Bartholomew Rossi's accounts. It is made clear that Dracula bites Rossi with the purpose of turning him into a historian vampire because of his relentless chase of Dracula's quest, and it is a very obvious point that Dracula has to feed in order to survive at regular intervals; however, there is not a single scene in which any kind of biting is observed. Kostova completely eliminates the component of blood in a text belonging to vampire lore and replaces this aspect of physicality with intellectuality. Hence, the purpose of Kostova's revenant interrupting the natural order of life seems to spring up from a route far more complicated than a conquer plan with imperialist undertones – evil is ghosting through the libraries and archives and what he mainly set his sights on is to have a complete control over history itself:

> With your unflinching honesty, you can see the lesson of history. History has taught us that the nature of man is evil, sublimely so. Good is not perfectible, but evil is. Why should you not use your great mind in service of what is perfectible? I ask you, my friend, to join me of your own accord in my research…Together we will advance the historian's work beyond anything the world has ever seen. There is no purity like the purity of the sufferings of history. You will have what every historian wants: history will be reality to you. We will wash our minds clean with blood (Kostova 2005, 830).

This is one of the greatest torturers of the history stating his belief that humanity carries an evil core inside, and if it is obvious that you can "perfect evil", the question necessarily presents itself as to why one would try to do any good in his lifetime. Dracula constantly tries to get the adjective of "evil" away from himself and attribute it to the humanity and their past filled with horrors; the reader and

Rossi himself finally take notice of the totality of Dracula's plan when he explains the spreading of his 1453 dragon books around the world, referring to the year of Constantinople's fall and the capture of the capital of the Byzantine Empire by the Ottoman Empire. He states that he did not just randomly spread the books to any kind of people: "They go only to the most promising scholars, and to those I think may be persistent enough to follow the dragon to his lair. And you are the first who has actually done it. I congratulate you. My other assistants I leave out in the world, to do my research" (Kostova 2005, 845).

Kostova's Dracula plans on building evil not exactly physically, but ontologically by gathering a library of humanity's evil, thus having a clear dictatorship on history. Whereas contemporary vampire stories romanticize the vampiric state, Kostova takes pains to associate that state with an indisputable evil that is closer to "real" evil than supernatural evil. She also takes pains to highlight the "real" evil committed by political figures like Vlad III in their thirst of power, and draws a direct connection between Vlad III's evil deeds during life and Dracula's evil nature in death. Once dead, Dracula does not commit evil on the same scale (if measured in the cost of human lives), but rather exhibits an ontological evil that dictates his being, and this evil infects his minions through saliva and blood. By building this library of evil, even though the revenant is exorcised, his threat to humanity does not completely disappear for his ontology stays on earth after his death. Preserving one's history in order to keep the ontological existence parallel to the physical one functions as one of the most important duties of the revenant. Consequently, Paul is the one that links Dracula's evil nature to those historical figures in the past by analysing their deeds through their lives:

> And I wonder if destroying him would make that much difference in the future. Think of what Stalin did to his people, and Hitler. They did not need to live five hundred years to accomplish these horrors.
> 'I know,' I said. 'I've thought about that, too.'
> Helen nodded. 'The strange thing, you know, is that Stalin openly admired Ivan the Terrible. Two leaders who were willing to crush and kill their own people—to do anything necessary—in order to consolidate their power. And whom do you think Ivan the Terrible admired?' (Kostova 2005, 720).

This may be one of the greatest points in the story where the characters come to realize that what Dracula has been saying so far about the evil nature of humanity might be true after all. Paul immediately questions: "You told me there were many Russian tales about Dracula" (Kostova 2005, 721). The mystery is nearly solved and the reader gets a dangerous glance through history, creating a mental link between

Vlad Dracula and Ivan the Terrible, Stalin, Hitler and every other dictator that had turned millions of people's lives into hell as well as between fictional Dracula and the historical figures. What gives the core essence of the novel is a paragraph told by our unnamed narrator from the beginning of the novel. She has grown into a historian and piled everything that happened through the quest of Dracula's tomb in order to transfer the information to the next generation, ironically serving Dracula's initial purpose of creating a library of evil by producing a text full of Dracula and his history. The temptation to further pursue this quest that takes over the historians from the very beginning to the end of the novel, then, is undeniable:

> The thing that most haunted me that day, however, as I closed my notebook and put my coat on to go home, was not my ghostly image of Dracula, or the description of impalement, but the fact that these things had – apparently – actually occurred. If I listened too closely, I thought, I would hear the screams of the boys, of the "large family" dying together. For all his attention to my historical education, my father had neglected to tell me this: history's terrible moments were real. I understand now, decades later, that he could never have told me. Only history itself can convince you of such a truth. And once you've seen that truth—really seen it—you can't look away (Kostova 2005, 51).

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