

## Dracula Metaphysics. Exploring the Vampire Motif in Contemporary Women's Fiction

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*Three women writers, Elisabeth Kostova, Doina Ruşti, and Ruxandra Ivăncescu chose the vampire motif as the core of their historiographical metafiction. The principle of verisimilitude that dominates their prose writing in different percentages, transforms the narrative strategy into an initiation journey for interpreting various traces left behind by a mysterious character. They are blending into their prose writing historic archival facts, popular knowledge embedded in folktales and ballads, as well as important artifacts. As requested by the literary convention, their vampire becomes a time traveler, interested in maintaining power and offering protection to a few ones, a more intellectual and at times a good-natured character, stripped of his sensuality.*

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Even if the novelists belong to different cultures and literary traditions, American for Elisabeth Kostova, and Romanian for Doina Ruşti and Ruxandra Ivăncescu, they are challenging through their fiction the very old core of the image of the vampire, that of immortality. This ability and desire to overcome time, the non-limitation in time is still attractive for all of them and it will be embodied in characters like Drakulya, a reinterpretation of the historical figure of Vlad Ţepeş, as in Elisabeth Kostova's *The Historian* (2005), several of Vlad Ţepeş's descendants, as in Ruxandra Ivăncescu's *Ochiul dragonului* (2007), or even a different vampire, a living witness from medieval times, Zogru, as in Doina Ruşti's novel (2013).

The access to eternity is not a curse for these vampires, as they are not in danger to suffer "the inevitability of boredom" (Mahon 2015, 13). Even if Elisabeth Kostova and Ruxandra Ivăncescu use "a kind of macro-presentation of occult or

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mythological activity which is shown to control the narrative in certain ways,” (Gelder 1994, 109) and engage their main characters in mythic scenarios, the minutiae of her reconstructions of distant and exotic places (the Balkans, the ancient Egypt, the Romanian Principalities) can prevent a certain sensation of tiredness in her readers, and may help her characters slip less into some existential boredom. Another very imaginative way of surpassing this problem, of boredom, is developed by Doina Ruști through Zogru, a formless vampire, localized version of the archetypal Folkloric vampire identified by Christopher Frayling (1991), nevertheless a keen observer of his surprising bodily transformations. All these novels though, are displaying the main feature of contemporary vampire fiction, as discussed by Ken Gelder: they are “‘panoramic’ in both space and *time*” (Gelder 1994, 111). And because they belong to novels written in the 2000s, we will find as a common trait the fact underlined by Sorcha Ní Fhlainn that “vampire evolution also centres on the return of cultural myths and legends” (Ní Fhlainn 2019, 12).

Elisabeth Kostova’s *The Historian* resembles, at a first glance, a detective story, where scholars from both West and East academia are struggling to give an appropriate interpretation to a consistent amount of signs, texts, books, inscriptions, maps and old parchment documents, scattered in several locations in Eastern Europe and the Balkans, in order to discover the truth about Drakulya (his name as it is printed in the medieval book) and his hiding place. The best reader (but reading *per se* is not sufficient, as we will see) takes it all, reaching Dracula’s hiding place and getting his/her eternal prize, namely to submit under the vampire’s control.

Imagined also as an alternative development of the historical figure of Vlad Țepeș, Kostova’s vampire is not so much a myth of the modern world but an opening to the possibility of surviving of a frightful figure from the past. Through this hermeneutic approach Kostova camouflages in her novel a mythic scenario, the eternal confrontation between good and evil, where the forces at play are involved into a strategic game throughout historical epochs.

Dracula’s surviving skills do not depend so much on blood as on his fame, carefully curated by himself, for “the key to immortality itself, [is] to live on through narrative” (Ní Fhlainn 2019, 140). He has already generated a secret history that needs to be perpetuated through old books with a dragon’s imprint that are destined to entice scholars with a passion for the past. These chosen readers are attracted by the magical image of the dragon, thus conjuring Drakulya’s apparitions, consequently enhancing his powers.

There is a manifested need of this damned eternal figure to be nurtured by the belief of his faithful followers, as the conventional vampire was living through blood. In this matter Kostova's image of the vampire is challenging the possibility of a postmodern one, detached itself from folkloric roots, becoming increasingly secular, as discussed by recent scholars (Ní Fhlainn 2019, 9).

As the act of reading transforms itself into a ritual connection with Dracula, so does the religious ritual, both Catholic and Orthodox, and also the popular, folkloric one. Several sacred places appear to be central in the novel, as Saint-Matthieu-des-Pyrénées-Orientales, the Catholic monastery dating from 1000 A.D., with the old sarcophagus hiding the first abbot who conquered death through mysterious ways, but also Dracula, at the end of the novel, Snagov Monastery, the first of Țepeș' tombs, now an empty one, and Sveti Gheorghii, the Bulgarian monastery protecting Dracula's crypt, tomb and library, where he is discovered by Paul and Helen, the narrator's parents. These places act a source of power and protection for Țepeș/Dracula, both in life and after his death by beheading.

Religious ritual is still meaningful in the world of the novel, constituting a founding narrative, whether it is about medieval times or contemporary ones. Therefore the vampire's connection with the sacred world makes him immune to the power of the cross and gives him the possibility to attack in these very sacred spaces, as at Rila monastery in Bulgaria, or at the French monastery in the Pyrenees.

As a dual figure, in this new life, Dracula was both revered in pilgrimages and feared in popular songs. The ambiguity raises from the ruler's heroic deeds, as a protector of the Church and member of the Order of the Dragon, as well as from his tyrant acts of violence.

Scholars in the novel reconstitute this alternative afterlife of the Wallachian ruler, and the reader discovers, at the end of the novel, information about the beginnings of this seemingly cyclic supernatural story: Vlad Dracul the Third acquired, by undisclosed means, a book containing the terrible secret discovered by some Catholic monks from an old French monastery. Even if originally the Order of the Dragon was founded several centuries later, in 1408, the connection of the chivalric order and the heresy proclaiming that the Dragon (and subsequently those protected by him) can conquer the saint (can find another way to immortality, not by Christian sanctity) was too appealing for Elisabeth Kostova. Vlad Țepeș' blasphemous wish, confessed to the Snagov monastery abbot, not to remain dead for a long time, was nevertheless protected by the Wallachian monks, who after Dracula's death eagerly searched to reunite his beheaded body with the missing

part, already taken to Istanbul, fully aware of the danger this new creature was spreading among the living: plagues and epidemics. The monks, among them a certain ubiquitous brother Kyril, were carrying “the sacred burden” until they reached a chosen monastery, indicated by a sign, an icon where the monster is depicted equal with the saint. It was at Sveti Gheorghii monastery in a remote part of Bulgaria, where Dracula was deposited.

This extraordinary moment was not recorded in documents but remained alive in the collective memory of both monks and peasants. Dracula’s ambivalence was carried further by the dragon’s image reminded in popular songs:

*The dragon came down our valley.  
He burned the crops and took the maidens.  
He frightened the Turkish infidel and protected our villages.  
His breath dried up the rivers and we walked across them.  
Now we must defend ourselves.  
The dragon was our protector,  
But now we defend ourselves against him.*

(Kostova 2005, 310)

His actions, remembered once as protective were now harmful. They generated an entire ritual, still reenacted by the local peasants, marked by apotropaic actions (dancing over a purifying bonfire holding old icons in their hands.) Alluding to popular beliefs connected with the celebration of St. George, the image of the vampire connected the literary and historiographical side with the ethnological one, infusing the text with a hint of lived experience.

In *The Historian* we are witnessing an old confrontation between good and evil, translated as a clash between a religious worldview – Dracula as the defender of the faith – perpetuated also by the superstitious beliefs of the peasants, and the rational investigators, historians and anthropologists, irrespective of their religious confessions, who turn into vampire hunters (Professor Rossi, Paul, Helen, Turgut Bora and Selim Aksay, the last ones being old enemies of the Wallachian prince and vampire, as members of the Crescent Guard).

Nevertheless, the expansion of evil is kept as a hidden menace throughout the novel, although Elisabeth Kostova does not provide any imagined possibility of the perfection of the evil Dracula wants to achieve and how. He is not the seductive Hollywood villain, but ultimately just a repulsive creature that bears the marks of

the underworld, and uses mostly fear to assure the loyalty of his followers. The power of the vampire, preserved by monks and commoners alike is this dreadful inheritance from the past. To understand Kostova's particular interpretation of evil, perpetuated with the help of religious authorities, we can refer to Christopher Fryling's commentary given in connection with Rousseau's *Letter to Beaumont*: "Vampires are thus yet another manifestation of the sombre and nefarious tyranny of opinion exercised by priests over the minds of men" (Frayling 1991, 60).

Even though he is not a character in her novel as such, Vlad Țepeș' image irradiates through other literary figures in Ruxandra Ivăncescu's *The Eye of the Dragon*. His image is built through features that are not all mainstream, and not all of them resemble the historical portrait of the Wallachian ruler. It is more the case of a literary influence, for his ardent desire to reign, to gain and maintain power even through very cruel means, as a way to survive the most troubled times of the medieval Balkans, is challenged by his interest in the spiritual side, which is also mentioned in Bram Stoker's novel:

As I learned from the researches of my friend Arminius of Buda-Pesth, he was in life a most wonderful man. Soldier, statesman, and alchemist – which latter was the highest development of the science knowledge of his time. He had a mighty brain, a learning beyond compare, and a heart that knew no fear and no remorse. He dared even to attend the Scholomance, and there was no branch of knowledge of his time that he did not essay. (Stoker 1983, 302)

In its historiographical approach, the story follows closely Vlad Dracula's descendants, each of them illustrating a dominant trait of their great-grandfather, at a time when Prince Alexandru Mircea, the fearful one, rules in Wallachia, and Petru Șchiopul, the alchemist, in Moldavia. To paraphrase Ken Gelder's discussion about vampire Lestat, for Ruxandra Ivăncescu "to be vampire is to *be* initiated" (Gelder 1994, 119) as well as cultured. Therefore, the center of the novel is occupied by Petru / Pietro, more of a Renaissance prince in search of the key knowledge of the world, a contemplative sage, as he abdicated his throne only to dedicate himself to alchemy in Tirol, at the Ambras castle, and then in Bolzano, where he is buried. His inclination towards the spiritual realm, the occult,

“astronomy and other fine things”<sup>2</sup> is actually historically recognized by the Ecumenic Patriarch of Constantinople, Ieremia the II<sup>nd</sup> in 1588. Truly conscious of the powers beneath the surface of the world, Petru is also an initiating master for all the other contemporary characters of the novel, first through the scriptural voice of his manuscripts and then *in praesentia*, greeting them as an old and new Count Dracula. The act of reading these manuscripts while using the talisman has the power of a ritual, for it unleashes the forces of chaos.

The contemporary fictional characters pass through dramatic events that reveal their hidden essence and identity, following the Emerald Tablet hermetic precept that “all which is below corresponds to that which is above / and all that is above corresponds to that which is below,” directions replaced in the novel by past and present times. Under Petru’s guidance, they will discover the eternal return of the same (as the alchemical *ouroboros*, another image of the dragon alluding to transformation and returning), the meaning of the bloodline and an initiated view of the world. Designed by unseen spiritual powers, the world literally rests on a Gordian knot that gathers together good and evil in right proportions, a knot forbidden to be touched. When it is threatened by the forces of chaos – the same throughout history – descendants of the medieval knights of the Order of the Dragon, i.e. Dracula’s descendants, and all those protected by goddess Isis have to fight back.

Even if Petru/Pietro is the philosophical character, that gives a superior meaning to the common events of history, at the beginning of this initiation story we find Vlad Dracula’s deeds while meeting an image of the goddess, a statue he will refer to as Madonna delle rose. Impressed by the complexity of expression mirrored on a statue’s face, “the kindness of a saint and the cruel wrath of an ancient divinity seemed to have been merged in the marble” (Ivănescu 2017, 567, my translation). Vlad defends her against furious Christians, presenting it as a Christian statue, as she wears the *crux ansata*, the Egyptian cross. From that moment onwards, in the history of his genealogical tree, Isis will be his protector and spiritual guide, watching over Dracula’s family with her Egyptian cross, her wreath of roses, and a dragon wreathed at her feet.

Vampires’ dream of surviving through the ages is addressed here in a way that does not enhance the Gothic element of blood consumption, but rather aims to reveal the spiritual meaning of the bloodline, of immortality attained through a

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<sup>2</sup> Information retrieved from the article referring to a commemorative religious service held in 2013 in Bolzano, Italy, in the memory of Petru Șchiopul, <https://basilica.ro/slujba-de-pomenire-a-domnitorului-petru-schiopul-in-bolzano-italia/>, consulted at 10.01.2022.

succession of deaths and resurrections. Ruxandra Ivănescu proposes an archetypal reading of *Dracula*,

The novel [Bram Stoker's *Dracula*] is much more than a horror story. To remain in the world's hall of fame, something must be outstanding in that book, something else than a story with Englishmen frightened by vampires. (...) The novel has a secret coded history. (...) The vampirising process is a union, a wedding resembling the alchemical one. The body is the alchemical vase where the transubstantiation process takes place, which ensures life after death. (Ivănescu 2017, 140, my translation)

The capacity to be reborn as the same or another is addressed by Pietro's belief that "histories are repeating themselves. Maybe with other people, in other epochs, or maybe with the same" (Ivănescu 2017, 453) The novelist reflects on Mircea Eliade's ideas of camouflaging sacred scenarios into the profane, as all the characters are guided into a well of time, reaching the mythical time, protected by Isis, the bird-winged goddess, the goddess mastering the old secrets of the initiatory complex of death and resurrection. It is a taming of the image of the vampire, as Ruxandra Ivănescu alludes to, these once sacred rites being stored in the popular imagination.

This positive vision towards history reflected by Petru/Pietro, the idea of a superior meaning of the events, of a good that should prevail, of the importance of memory and of the salvation of the world is induced perhaps by the harmonious order of the Spanish Room in the Ambras Castle Hall and certainly not by its disturbing Chamber of Art and Wonders.

With Zogru, Doina Ruști's vampire, readers experiment an intimate knowledge of history from below, from the point of view of a bodiless being that inhabits the common people from medieval times till nowadays, but also other beings, such as a dog, and even objects like the Snagov's monastery gate. Zogru is a strange combination of Zburător [The Flying Man], a supernatural being in the Romanian folklore that has a luminous impalpable nature, attacking and provoking erotic desires in sleeping young women, and a vampire, as he needs other bodies to survive. His way of entering them is a classic one, through a bite, with marks left on the neck. Being bodiless and fragile, "a thin thread of green light," (Ruști 2013, 6, my translation) he uses his hosts as a place of living and as means of locomotion. Therefore he can experience the world only through its beings and objects, being incorporated into their substance. This first feeling of inhabiting someone is truly

ecstatic, and Pampu, the young servant at a Wallachian boyar in the times of Vlad Dracula the Young, possibly one of his sons, will be forever remembered.

He went in through the veins of his tensed neck and he entered gladly in the warm blood. He lived everything with an infinite enthusiasm. He ran through veins and vessels, taking into possession a welcoming and stimulating territory. (...) He was the master of this lad. (...) In those first weeks he never thought of Pampu as of a victim. He knew he was possessing him (...) he felt as a spoiled guest or as a tourist in vacation. (Ruști 2013, 6-7, my translation)

A special connection to his birthplace needs to be mentioned, as Zogru is a kind of exhalation of the warm spring earth. Like the classic vampires, he will keep this connection of utmost importance, as he can return to the maternal womb and regenerate through sleep. There is no Gothic imagery of coffins present here, just this special relation to land, and its people, that he enjoys. Far away from home, across the ocean, in America, Pampu can survive only as long as he finds Wallachians.

There is another folkloric trait that Doina Ruști blends into Zogru's image. As a spirit of this world, he cannot possess a person for more than 40 days, otherwise the host becomes exhausted and dies. Here, the novelist is freely fictionalizing a popular, but also a religious belief that 40 days after their death, the soul of the deceased is free to roam the world, visiting the places and people he loved most.

As soon as Zogru finds there are several types of human bodies, ones that he can enter and exit freely, some that reject him and ones that capture him, he starts vampirizing mercilessly, and thematically, murderers, conmen, women liars, politicians, and leaders. But this peregrination from body to body exhausts him and, not knowing details about his condition, he starts feeling burdened by time. Unknowingly, he can slip out of time, as in a regenerating unconscious period, losing contact with people of a certain epoch. He still finds pleasure derived from his condition of immortality, namely by following the bloodline of those he knew from the beginning.

History shapes him. Seeing the world through so many eyes of so many hosts changes him into an "immortal humanitarian," (Mahon 2015, 14) struggling to keep love and harmony in the world, preventing major conflicts, helping people suffering in hospitals during the communist period, or illegally fleeing from Romania. His voiced thoughts reveal the birth of the "new man," which is to say people



contaminated by ideology in communist Romania, and not what the communist regime dreamt about. The interesting thing here would be that Zogru cannot inhabit a host like this, seeing them as hollow men.

It might be that the discovery of his aggressive abilities, both mental and physical, that he transfers to the human body he is inhabiting made Zogru aware of his manipulative powers and, ultimately, transformed him ethically. In the way Doina Ruști imagines him, the vampire is deprived of eroticism, although he can feel love as an admiration towards a female character, but possessing her through a subdued male host does not seem to be fair. Out of his love consumed in a female's body, Zogru creates his companion, an ethereal being like himself, with whom he will feel fulfilled. This new state of being implies also a retrospective clear image of his trajectory in time, "a maze of white corridors passing from one blood to another," (Ruști 2013, 207, my translation) leading him to the revelation of his nature: "he is the unknown pulse of the world and the thrill of death" (Ruști 2013, 207).

In all the three novels analyzed so far we encountered a preference for the image of a de-sexualized vampire, along with an almost entire lack of horror and grotesque. The fascination of the vampire comes from his intellectual nature, as in Kostova and Ivăncescu's novels, a superior individual that dominates humans through the power of books and rituals. It is his ability to transcend time that horrifies (in Kostova), or is tempting ordinary humans to mimic (as in Ivăncescu). The vampire's secret is passed along to younger generations in an initiation process. Completely lacking in Kostova, attraction is understood only in terms of romantic love, and even if Ivăncescu's vampire prince is not the protagonist of a love story, there are other examples of the neophytes that consolidate this ideal androgynous view. Even if it does not have a tempting body, Doina Ruști's vampire is capable of manifesting love and good will towards people and other creatures. Ultimately, he is the more sublimated of the three, as the eternal rhythm of life.

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