

Dracula; or, in the eve of St. Georg's day under a faint flickering blue flame you may find a book.

1.

Dracula was the first book I read that changed my mind. I was very young, maybe twelve years of age and I had barely any understanding of the world outside my home town. The internet wasn't around yet and I remember a whole month of uncertainty whether Bram was a man's or a woman's name but regardless of the author's gender the book was my first encounter with distance on a synchronic and a diachronic level.¹ Suddenly I understood that travelling to other places and times was as easy as turning the page.

Nearly all of the interests of my adolescence root back to that initial reading of the novel: Soon my bookshelf started filling with books about *Wij*, *Horla*, *Guzla* and *Wurdalak* and lead to broader readings of non-vampire-novels by their authors and slowly, step by step and page by page, I became a lover of literature. At the same time, I developed larger interest in history after occupying myself with Vlad Tepes and his times, as well as with Arminius Vambery, who travelled the Middle East disguised as a dervish and inspired the character of Abraham Van Helsing. I then followed the vampire's traces back to the times when he was yet a foul peasant, a zombie who brought ill luck to those who's names he called and to those who heard him smacking from the grave, followed him to the times when he was promoted by the three religions of the Balkans and used for their own interest and and to the time when Maria Theresia sent Dr. Van Swieten down south in order to examine and crush that superstition.² I followed him all the way to the Villa Diodati on the lake Geneva where three extraordinary artists dipped into the tradition of fantastic novels and forever changed it as the vampire turned into what he is known as nowadays: a passionate lover and dandy.

Simultaneously the vampire accompanied my initiation process as a cinephile: from the expressionist *Noferatu* of Murnau to the colourful British Hammer Horrors I watched all available screen adaptations and again one thing lead to another as the directors became familiar, their films not related to vampires became interesting to me, and not so long after, I was a lover of film. For me *Dracula* was the start of it all.

2.

What's to be found in that book that changed me so much? There are some very strong parts - some elements that forever shaped my understanding of the mythical: the coachman marking the spots of the faint flickering blue flames in the eve of St. George's day (I developed a taste for Christian nights with a pagan foundation) and the names and the descriptions of the landscapes: Bistritz, Borgo-Pass, Bukovina, Carpathians – my personal definition of the sublime.

But I think what caught my interest most and astonished me so much was the way how serious the protagonists would take their lives, their interests and their loved ones.

¹ I have always kept this a secret. When asked about my first contact with literature I would either joke that it was the collected works of Lenin or I would sketch myself as a classical reader of Eugene Sue's *The Mysteries of Paris*, Jules Verne's *Two Year's Vacation* etc. to entertain myself, but about *Dracula* I think I have never opened up.

² In addition to these factual theories I developed idiosyncratic phantasies about enlightened writers deliberately promoting the vampire superstition in their writing in order to keep the people afraid of the dead instead of the living, hoping that the mob would exhume corpses and impale and burn them instead of burning living women for their alleged witchcraft.

These people respected, cherished and valued other peoples feeling and their passions, they would take the time to carefully speak and to listen, to observe their surroundings and to note things down. One coach passenger quoting Gottfried August Bürger's *Lenore* ("Die Toten reiten schnell") and another one recognizing it seemed as far away from my life experiences as it seemed beautiful. In *Dracula* I got a glance of a time where people appreciated other people and their time (A doctor taking his patients seriously - can this be possible?). The remarkable thing was that these people were no aristocrats liberated from existential struggles, but people who got stuff done, who worked and still *felt* at the same time.

In this context, the first half of *Dracula* always read as a tale of hospitality and traveling for me. In Jonathan the reader finds an individual appreciating the process of travel and engaging in serious forms of preparation:

Having had some time at my disposal when in London, I had visited the British Museum and made search among the books and maps in the library regarding Transylvania; it had struck me that some foreknowledge of the country could hardly fail to have some importance in dealing with a nobleman of that country.

During his journey, Jonathan keeps log of his experiences in his diary and zealously notes down local observance, superstition and vocabulary: A traveling gentleman is always at once a writer, an ethnologist and an ethnologist. In a passage revealing the loving and respecting relationship with his fiancée Mina and the thoroughness of his actions he decides to get the receipt of local dish he enjoyed for her:

I had for dinner, or rather supper, a chicken done up some way with red pepper, which was very good but thirsty. (Mem. get recipe for Mina.) I asked the waiter, and he said it was called "paprika hendl," and that, as it was a national dish, I should be able to get it anywhere along the Carpathians.

In the Carpathians, the hospitality towards him starts with a letter of friendship by Count Dracula:

'My friend. - Welcome to the Carpathians. I am anxiously expecting you. Sleep well tonight. At three tomorrow the diligence will start for Bukovina; a place on it is kept for you. At the Borgo Pass my carriage will await you and will bring you to me. I trust that your journey from London has been a happy one, and that you will enjoy your stay in my beautiful land. - Your friend, Dracula.'

These gestures of friendship and respect continue throughout the journey, e.g. when the Count secures the best seat on the coach for Jonathan, when the coachmen has prepared a bottle of Slivovitz to warm up his passenger and when the Counts sits with Jonathan through his dinner despite his own satiety.

Like Jonathan has prepared for Transylvania, the count has prepared for his guest and the culture he is willing to get involved with:

"I am glad you found your way in here, for I am sure there is much that will interest you. These companions," and he laid his hand on some of the books, "have been good friends to me, and for some years past, ever since I had the idea of going to London, have given me many, many hours of pleasure. Through them I have come to know your great England, and to know her is to love her. I long to go

through the crowded streets of your mighty London, to be in the midst of the whirl and rush of humanity, to share its life, its change, its death, and all that makes it what it is.”

When explaining the ancient customs, the folkways and the history of his own country at a seclusive conversations nearby the chimney and later asking his guest to do the same, Dracula is not a predator luring Jonathan, but inquisitive, curious, and serious about his interest in the guest’s culture. Their appropinquating is gradual and gentle, slowly redeeming the given credit of trust:

As yet I only know your tongue through books. To you, my friend, I look that I know it to speak.’

‘But, Count,’ I said, ‘You know and speak English thoroughly!’ He bowed gravely.

‘I thank you, my friend, for your all too-flattering estimate, but yet I fear that I am but a little way on the road I would travel.

Throughout my adolescence I have always wished for a relationship like the one between Jonathan and the Count: distant, sincere and respectful. I read *Dracula* like a gothic novel, but surely not like a horror novel, and when I later read Fred Saberhagens *The Dracula Tape*, a reworked version of Bram Stokers novel where Count Dracula retells the story from his point of view and reveals that he never had bad intentions but that the circumstances made him fall out with Jonathan it made perfect sense for me.

In my personal reading, the second part of the novel set in Britain is mainly a tale of friendship: For the reader, the Count is gone, Burberry-cheques may have replaced the red fabric on the inside of his cape and he became a somewhat vague idea in the head of his enemies, an opponent to unite against, forever linking the fate of different men from different backgrounds bound by their loving respect for Lucy and literally giving their blood to save her while also overcoming their rivalry and difference for one noble cause. They engage in true friendship, respecting each other and taking all necessary measures for a serious situation. They combine their knowledge, power and possibilities, use their connections, consult their teachers³ and place their personal interests behind the group’s interest. In this act of friendship and mutual support they succeed and achieve the unlikely, despite some sufferings and losses.

3.

I am well aware that this is a rather exotic reading - maybe even an idiosyncratic misreading.⁴ During the years I have not met many readers who shared my opinion on the novel but I do see some similar ideas or at least their traces in some of the screen adaptations. While the more ambitious and high-budgeted Dracula adaptations usually focus on more rewarding aspects like love, passion, blood and mythology, some lower-budget and TV-production (like Jesus Franco’s *Count Dracula* of 1969) contain and celebrate the elements I analysed in the

³ The fact that Van Helsing preaches enlightenment but practises his vampire hunt exclusively with old methods of superstition is critiqued by many scholars, but to me it gave a very comfortable feeling, that science and myth come from the same substratum of truth.

⁴ No matter how far-off a reading is, it will not be more devious than the popular spatial, postcolonial and gender readings of the book.

previous chapter.

Lacking in all of the screen adaptations is an adequate representation of the unique mixed form of the novel consisting of different narrators and revealing itself to the reader through different media. The reader slowly follows the storyline bit by bit through different diaries, letters, notes, a logbook and „a cutting from the dailygraph“.

This narrative inconsistency and the different perspectives add a big amount of suspense to the novel's qualities mentioned in paragraph 2: it allows the reader early suspicion, which gradually grows more and more likely, but only very late can the reader gain certainty that Jonathan, Mina and Lucy had glutted the thirst of a VAMPYRE!

Aleksandar Vadim