FROM VLAD ȚEPEȘ TO COUNT DRACULA. A CHALLENGING RELATION BETWEEN HISTORY AND MYTH

Ovidiu IVANCU

Abstract: *The relation between myth and reality is a very complex one, and it becomes more and more difficult to discuss because there is a significant risk to touch national sensibilities, clichés and painful taboos. Just the simple statement that a nation is based not only on historical facts but mainly on mythologies, elaborated during centuries of evolution and living together, might be considered an exaggeration. Since the beginning of our adventure on Earth, a sum of universal archetypes were incorporated in various myths that crossed the centuries. The present paper aims to discuss and analyse how a 15th century Romanian historical figure (Vlad Țepeș, i.e. Vlad the Impaler) turned into a well spread literary myth, and to debate about the two opposite perspectives regarding the same mythological figure (Count Dracula). If, for the Romanian collective mentality, Vlad Țepeș is associated even today with the idea of justice, in Europe he is nothing more than a tyrant. Moreover, in Bram Stoker`s novel, Dracula has colonial ambitions, wanting to conquer no less than the entire England. In fact, we will see that the path from history to myth is (and it is not at all a particular case) a chain of multiple mutations. At the beginning of this chain we find Vlad Țepeș, his cruelty (which was not quite an exception for that time), his fights against the Turkish Empire and some economic disagreements with neighbours, and at the other end of the chain we have a blood-thirsty vampire placed in an exotic landscape meant to justify his credibility. The present paper analyses the confrontation of the myth as defined by Plato, Roland Barthes, Roger Caillois, Jean Jacques Wunenburger, Claude Levi-Strauss and Mircea Eliade with the reality attested by historical documents, in an attempt to clarify the exact point when history and literature become an indistinguishable conglomerate.*

Keywords: Vlad Țepeș, Dracula, myth, history.

I. Understanding the concepts

Any attempt to discuss the connection between myth and history has to start from the very beginning by defining the myth in itself. The attempt is rather difficult today when, on the one hand, we deal with a scientific meaning of the myth, and, on the other hand, we face nowadays a simplified approach, indicating that this notion is part of the everyday's conversation. There is a tendency of establishing between *myth* and *story* a complete synonymy which is more than relative. Of course, any myth feels the need to be verbalised, because, as Claude Lévi-Strauss put it, "myth is language" (Levy-Strauss, 1963, p. 210), but the story is nothing than a frame which not always incorporates the myth in its integrality. The major distinction is that a story is always connected to a specific temporal context, while the myth is to be found beyond time, or, to be more accurate, it is to be found only in relation to an "illo tempore", the primary, sacred time.

Among many examples, the myth of Dracula illustrates the distance, the distortion of the story over the myth. Being written at the end of the 19th century (the late Romantic period in literature), Bram Stoker's novel is built on a romantic fit-up (see the dialogues and descriptions) or, to be more accurate, on a literary mixture between Victorianism and Romanticism. In the same time, the 19th century being the century of the nations, the plot could not avoid a national pattern: Dracula wants to invade England and, of course, he is stopped on time by some brave British people, with the help of a Dutch doctor. The book, as any literary piece, is a direct result of a literary context. Consequently, from time to time, in "Dracula", one could easily observe, under the Victorianism's influence, the prudery when the author describes, for example, the love story between Lucy and Jonathan Harker: "I love him. I am blushing as I write [...]" (Stoker, 1897, p. 52).

On the other hand, the myth itself transcends literature, and this is not at all hard to prove. If one discusses the 16th century legends about Dracula and one compares them with Bram Stoker's novel, it is more than evident that each story, even though it deals with the same myth, is somewhat different. It happens because the myth of the vampire reiterates the fear against the death and an ancestral belief that the frontier between life and death could be, sometimes, surpassed. These

fears are not subordinated to literary or cultural trends. Ab *origine*, of course, the Greek term "mythos" means "story" or "word". However, the literature today is almost incapable of creating myths, being forced to use variations of old myths. And this is because, as the folklorist Mary Magoulick says: "Myths are symbolic tales of the **distant past (often primordial times)** that concern cosmogony and cosmology (the origin and nature of the universe), may be connected to belief systems or rituals, and may serve to direct social action and values" (Magoulik, 2015). If the myth is not the story itself, what could it be? For the Romanian historian Lucian Boia the myth is "[...] an imaginary construction: story, representation or idea which tries to understand the essence of a cosmical and social phenomenon by the values of a community and with the purpose of assuring its cohesion" (Boia, 2006, p. 39).

The *purpose* of a myth, if one accepts the idea that a myth has a purpose of its own, is to transfer the responsibilities for something one does not understand and to deal with fears, transferring them from an abstract background into a concrete one. Claude Levi-Strauss noticed that

> "on the one hand it would seem that in the course of a myth anything is likely to happen. There is no logic, no continuity. Any characteristic can be attributed to any subject; every conceivable relation can be found. With myth, everything becomes possible. But, on the other hand, the apparent arbitrariness is belied by the astounding similarity between myths collected in widely different regions. Therefore the problem: if the content of a myth is contingent, how are we going to explain the fact that myths throughout the world are so similar?" (Lévy-Strauss, p. 208).

If the myth tries only to legitimise a specific community, how can we explain the myth of the flood, for example, which is to be found in different territories with almost the same connotations? These communities are so different that the idea of cohesion between them is almost absurd.

The foundation myths could have this role of assuring a cohesion, not necessarily a national one (it can be a religious one, as well), but all the other types of myths are not in such a profound connection with the idea of cohesion. Eschatological

myths, for example, are to be explained through various fears the human being experienced in its entire existence, particularly at that time when science did not have answers for the most common phenomena.

Dracula itself is a myth in which one could easily distinguish the influence of two types of mythologies: the historical mythology and the eschatological one. Jean Jacques Wunenburger, in his book *Viața imaginilor* (*La vie des images*) stated that the foundation of a myth does not have to be understood as an invention or a creation, but, more probably, as a reiteration, or, as Plato suggested, as a reminiscence (Wunenburger, 1998, p. 41). According to this theory, it is impossible for a myth to be entirely created by modern literature. One could argue with the argument of the urban myths, which seem a creation of our modernity. Looking closely, these myths are nothing else than reiterations of old ones in a modern shape. The idea expressed by Jean Jacques Wunenburger is closer to our understanding of myth and the approach this paper wants to propose. Being more than fiction, more than pure history, the myth is a code which deals with the human experiences, and modern literary fiction is nothing but an attempt to use the substance of the myth without being capable of entirely exploring the myth in itself. The rituals, the old legends, and the collective mentality are, all of them in different proportions, a *shelter* for the myth itself. The present paper does not intend only to analyse the Bram Stoker`s text, but to make the necessary connections between the novel and the other ways in which the myth chose to reveal itself.

Northrop Frye considers that the myth provides literature with patterns, structures. Any research on myth has to incorporate literary texts, but cannot be based exclusively on them. The historical myths and this is the case with Dracula, have at least two other strong components which are to be analysed in order to understand the appearance of such a myth, its function and its evolution. These two components are the historical context and, as it was already stated, the role the myth plays in the collective mentality of those who are responsible for creating it in its actual shape (in our case, the Romanian collective mentality).

II. Vlad Țepeș and Dracula

With Dracula, the historical context is not just an accumulation of objective facts, but, mostly, a reflection of these facts inside the society. The image of Dracula detaches itself from the real character that is based upon, following a separate symbolic trajectory, as in any other similar situation in our modern world. Because, as Jean Jacques Wunenburger already stated in his book, *Filozofia imaginilor* (*La philosophie des images*), with the modernity, the image will gain more and more independence if compared to its model (Wunenburger, 2004, p. 159).

Before discussing the historical facts, it is essential to reaffirm the connection between Vlad Dracul and Bram Stoker` character. One may easily find in the book the following excerpt:

> "In the records there are such words as 'stregoica' witch, 'ordog' and 'pokol' Satan and hell, and in one manuscript this very Dracula is spoken of as 'wampyr,' which we all understand too well" (Stoker, p. 224).

The brief descriptions about the Count's biography and the history of his family prove the connection, as well.

> "In his life, his living life, he go over the Turkey frontier and attack his enemy on his own ground. He be beaten back, but did he stay? No! He come again, and again, and again" (Stoker, p. 299).

Let us go back to the facts. The story begins in the 14th century, when the King of Hungary, Sigismund of Luxemburg founded the Order of the Dragon. The symbol of this Order was a dragon, and the scope was to protect Christian Europe against the Ottoman Empire. Vlad Țepeș's father (Vlad II) was a member of this order. Proud of his affiliation, Vlad II, the ruler of Walachia (an actual southern Romanian territory), stamped some coins with the figure of the dragon. The Romanians, not at all familiarised with this mythological figure (not a part of the Romanian mythology), associated the dragon with Satan. That is why Vlad Țepeș's father was called Vlad Dracul or Vlad Drăculea – Dracul or Drăculea meaning in Romanian "Satan". The name was then perpetuated for all Vlad's sons, including of

course Vlad III Ţepeş or Vlad Dracul (the character Bram Stoker chose to incarnate Dracula). It is now the time to elucidate the other surname of the ruler – Ţepeş. In Romanian, "Ţepeş" means the "Impaler". The punishment, frequently used in the Middle Ages, and for sure not an invention of Ţepeş, caused a slow and painful death. The convicted were often immobilised while a sharp stake was driving slowly into their bodies. Vlad Ţepeş used to arrange the stakes according to the rank of the convicted, the height of the stake indicating the rank. This punishment is attested for the first time in the Neo-Assyrian Empire. Some historians consider that the term "crucifixion" may also have the meaning of impalement in the Roman Empire. In the Middle Ages, in Asia and Europe, the impalement had been used on a large scale. Despite the spectacular description, it is worth saying, for those not entirely familiar with the 15th century in Europe, that the list of the possible punishments at that time included a lot of other tortures.

Famous for his battles against the Ottoman Empire, Vlad Ţepeş or Vlad Dracul never ruled in Transylvania, but thrice in Walachia, in 1448, between 1455-1462, and in 1476. As in the case of his surname, a result of a misunderstanding, the connection between Count Dracula and Transylvania is just a cause of a strange context which led Bram Stoker to the idea that his character should be located in Transylvania.

At this point, three major questions one has to answer to. First, why count Dracula is settled in Transylvania and not in Walachia, where Vlad Ţepeş ruled? Second, how did the story about Vlad the Vampire exactly appeared? Third, how these stories ceased to have just a national or, at any rate, a Balkanic circulation, becoming a source of attraction for the Irish writer Bram Stoker? For some of these particular answers, one has to stop interrogating history. One has to scrutinise the route of the human imagination and the general patterns of historical myths.

The first folk legends about Ţepeş's cruelty appear due to some Transylvanian merchants, a German-speaking ethnical group, not satisfied with the taxes Ţepeş had imposed on them. Most probably, these legends were spread in the Western world, contributing later to Bram Stoker`s fiction. What it is important to be mentioned is that in the 15th century there were

two different, antagonistic, approaches on Vlad Ţepeş. In an Italian text written by Michael Bocignoli (an Italian diplomat) in 1524, he is positively described. We don't have reasons to suspect Bocignoli of subjectivity, because the same diplomat, in some other texts, describes in the worst possible terms the realities in Walachia, which proves he was not very fond of this country. The first legends about the cruelty of Vlad Ţepeş appear in southern Transylvania between 1459-1460. Judging on the documents we have, it is not an exaggeration to say that count Dracula and Vlad Ţepeş are today related just because of a commercial dispute in the 15th century. Rich and with strong western connections, the merchants unhappy with the taxes imposed by Ţepeş, had had the possibility to transmit the legends. Between 1462-1475, the surname Dracula becomes famous in the Western world. Amusingly enough, I can say that if Vlad Ţepeş had been more tolerant with the merchants in Transylvania, he wouldn't have had the *honour* and the *privilege* of being associated with the most well-known vampire in the history of literature. This is why the plot of "Dracula" is settled in Transylvania and not in Wallachia. The legends about the dark side of Ţepeş come from Transylvania and, we will soon see, the man responsible for informing Stoker about Dracula was also related to Transylvania.

At this point, a digression has to be made. Although it is not a common allegation among the scholars, there still is a popular tendency of associating Vlad Ţepeş with the beginning of vampirism, which is quite inaccurate. The history of vampirism did not begin with Vlad Ţepeş. He is just a *minor* vampire, maybe the most famous, but still a *minor* one in a history which starts almost 4 000 years ago with the Assyrian and Babylonian legends about the woman-demon Lamastu, who used to drink blood.

The first surprise one has reading Bram Stoker's novel is that Dracula is, in fact… not Romanian, but "szekey". The Count says: "we **Szekelys** have a right to be proud, for in our veins flows the blood of many brave races who fought as the lion fights, for lordship". Although the etymology of the word is still under dispute, *szekely* has, for sure, to be translated in Romanian as "secui". In the Romanian version of the book this was the translation. One may say there is just a little detail which, for the reader unfamiliar with the Romanian history, is

not particularly relevant. But it is crucial to mention that "secuii" were an ethnical Hungarian-speaking group. In the Medieval Hungary they were considered to be a minority, but in Transylvania, in the 15th century, they represented a part of the economical elite, if compared to the economical status of the Romanians. Even the title *count* in itself doesn't have a Romanian tradition, but it was mainly used during the Habsburg Dynasty. Again, the question which naturally arises is why Stoker changed the ethnical origin of Vlad Țepeș. One knows today that Bram Stoker used for his documentation some paintings and documents from the Royal Library in London. The paintings, from the 15th century, were painted by some representatives of the same ethnical group against whom Vlad Țepeș tried to impose higher taxes, therefore Stoker saw the evil image of the Romanian ruler as described by his traditional enemies, the same responsible for spreading in the Western world the rumors about Țepeș being a vampire.

It is important to mention that Bram Stoker never visited Transylvania or Walachia. Therefore, most probably, the ethnical origin of count Dracula (who, once again, is not Romanian, but "secui") was suggested by his friend, the Hungarian professor Hermann Vamberger. The professor himself becomes a character in the novel, under the name Arminius:

> "I have asked my friend Arminius, of Buda-Pesth University, to make his record, and from all the means that are, he tell me of what he has been. He must, indeed, have been that Voivode Dracula who won his name against the Turk, over the great river on the very frontier of Turkeyland. If it be so, then was he no common man, for in that time, and for centuries after, he was spoken of as the cleverest and the most cunning, as well as the bravest of the sons of the 'land beyond the forest' [trans silva, the Latin etymology of Transylvania]. That mighty brain and that iron resolution went with him to his grave, and are even now arrayed against us."

So, the history tells us how a common medieval ruler becomes a character due to a mixture between a particular historical context and some commercial animosities. This concoction is not, still, enough, to explain the success of the

story. Literary speaking, Bram Stoker's novel is a mediocre one. Romantic literary patterns and clichés, inconsistent characters, a predictable plot... And, above all, the inevitable battle between good and evil. Not even here, Stoker doesn't succeed in being particularly original. Dr. Van Helsing, who seems to know everything about vampires (no one explains how), has a certitude: the Evil cannot prevail over the Good:

> "in him some vital principle have in strange way found their utmost. And as his body keep strong and grow and thrive, so his brain grow too. All this without that diabolic aid which is surely to him. For it have to yield to the powers that come from, and are, symbolic of good".

Along with this certitude, the entire mystery of the novel falls apart.

Therefore, which mechanism transforms a common novel into a successful one? A part of its tremendous success comes with the movie based on the book. With "Dracula", success was granted only after the death of the author and not because of the plot, but barely because of some esthetic reasons. A typical Victorian gothic novel, "Dracula" is settled in an exotic place, thus answering the eagerness of the reader of that time for exoticism. Apart from *Frankenstein* or Edgar Allen Poe's short stories, for example, Bram Stoker's novel explores and exploits a space which generates a sort of strange fascination. The 19th and 20th centuries were those which granted success for the book, a success consolidated when the story turned into a movie (*Nosferatu*, 1922). Let's imagine just for a second that Count Dracula is not a character settled in Transylvania, but in Paris, London or some other well known European metropolis. An important part of the strange veracity this character has, disappears.

Bram Stoker himself emphasizes on this distinction between a wild place full of superstitions (Transylvania) and a country representing the peak of civilization when he puts these words in Dracula's mouth: "We are in Transylvania, and Transylvania is not England. Our ways are not your ways, and there shall be to you many strange things." Two times in the novel, the narrator insists on the superstitious nature of the natives, creating this way the perfect veridical settlement for the story: "Full of beauties of all imaginable kinds, and the people are

brave, and strong, and simple, and seem full of nice qualities. They are very, very superstitious." The message for the reader can be synthesized as following: *you are located in a real space, identifiable on the maps, a place one does not know too much about, therefore the only option is to trust the narrator who deliberately mixes reality with fiction*.

One can wonder if veracity is important when we are talking about literature. After all, literature is an alternative reality, why should we judge it with the criteria of veracity? Well, if veracity is not an important criterium when we talk about the professional field of literature, it becomes important when we take into consideration the public success of the story or, in other words, when one tries to analyse the literature with the instruments provided by the sociology of literature. Imagine, for example what Dan Brown's novel, *The Da Vinci Code* will be without the interference of the reality inside the fiction. People even nowadays do pilgrimages to the places described in the novel. If the 21st century, with all its technological developments couldn't oppose to the desire of the reader to identify reality with fiction, how could a Romantic early 20th century do it?

The visitors coming to Romania, once arrived in Transylvania, stop at Bran's castle, hoping to find Dracula there. Few of them know that the castle does not have anything to do neither with Vlad Țepeș, nor with count Dracula. Merely three decades ago, the American tourists saw the castle which seemed for them similar with the one described by Bram Stoker. No document ever attested this was the castle of Dracula. Most probably, Vlad Țepeș was imprisoned in this castle in 1462, according to a book published in 2002 by Gheorghe Lazea Postelnicu. Even if this information is true, Țepeș stayed there just for two months. Only a myth never needs documents to rely upon, all it needs is to bring up-to–date old archetypes.

For the Romanian collective mentality, Vlad Țepeș is associated with the supreme idea of justice. The old legends talk about a fair and wise ruler, during the time of which one could let in the middle of the streets a bag full of gold without being afraid of being robbed. The Romanian national poet, Mihai Eminescu, appeals to the image of Țepeș when he wants to discuss about the gluttony of his time in opposition with the old one. In 2007, the Romanian national television, following a BBC idea, initiated a campaign trying to find out who would be,

according to the Romanians, the the greatest Romanian. Vlad Țepeș was nominated the twelfth out of 100 representative figures.

In the end of my paper, I want to answer to what it could seem a very superficial question: how can one protect oneself against vampires? Bram Stoker mentions something about the power of garlic or the efficiency of a crucifix. I may add, against the vampires or against any myth which tends to forestall one's imagination one can protect oneself by trying to understand what exactly could be found beyond the myth. Having the information about the myth evolution and its functions is, by far, more effective than any crucifix or any amount of garlic carried around one's neck.

References:
Lévy-Strauss, C. (1968). *Structural Anthropology*. New York: Basic Books.
Stoker, B. (1897). *Dracula*. New York: Grosset & Dunlap.
Magoulick, M. (2015). What is Myth? Retrieved from https://faculty.gcsu.edu/custom-website/mary-magoulick/defmyth.htm.
Boia, L. (2006). *Pentru o istorie imaginarului*. Bucharest: Humanitas.
Wunenbruger, J.J (1998). *Viața imaginilor*. Cluj-Napoca: Cartimpex.
Wunenburger, J.J (2004). *Filozofia imaginii*. Iași: Polirom.
≈≈≈

Ovidiu IVANCU is a PhD holder at the University of Alba Iulia, Romania, The Faculty of History and Philology. The PhD dissertation (published in 2013) has the title: *Cultural Identity and Collective Romanian Mentality in Post-Communism: Images, Myths, Perceptions, Repositions.* Between 2009-2013, he was Visiting Lecturer at Delhi's University, New Delhi, India, teaching Romanian Language and Literature. Between 2017-2018, he was Visiting Lecturer with State University of Comrat (Republic of Moldova). Currently, he teaches Romanian Language and Culture with Vilnius University (Lithuania). He has published numerous articles on the Romanian imaginary and collective mentality. He has also published articles in different collective volumes which are in Central and Eastern European Online Library. Ovidiu Ivancu's scientific interests are imagology, the theory of mentalities, literary theory, literary criticism, history of literature. He is a permanent collaborator of the journal *Viața Românească*.