

SLAYERS

AND THEIR

VAMPIRES

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A CULTURAL HISTORY
OF KILLING THE DEAD

BRUCE A. MCCLELLAND

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FOR

Jan, who opened the gate;

Bruce, who pointed the way;

✧

Cynthia, who held the torch



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Almost three centuries have passed since a curious rash of hysterical vampire epidemics at the fringes of the Habsburg Empire first brought this type of oral folklore from the mysterious Balkans and the Transylvanian region into Western consciousness. Although there had previously been no precisely equivalent folklore about the ambulatory dead in the Roman Catholic and Protestant countries of Western Europe, the Inquisition's prosecutions of people denounced as witches were still fresh in the public memory. In fact, it was the possible recrudescence of such intolerable social injustice that prompted Empress Maria Theresa to send a noted scientist to a Slavic region on the northeastern frontier to learn what these epidemics were all about and then to advise her on how to prevent a new round of witch hunts from emerging.

Here, then, from the very beginning of the incorporation of the vampire motif into the European literary tradition, a loose equation was established between the witch and the vampire. Subsequently, these two incarnate vectors of evil have continued to compel the attention of artists, scientists, clergy, and scholars of various disciplines, as well as the general populace. As Western society has become more secular, furthermore, these figures have increasingly been used to ground the negative pole of historical (and military) Christianity, insofar as both are represented as enemies of all that is good and, in some cases, as being in league with Satan or the Devil. The witch, for example, is portrayed as indulging in total, corrupt inversions of Christian ritual and behavior, while the vampire can be destroyed by implicitly sacred implements of Christian magic (the cross, holy water, etc.).

The concept of evil, in the West at least, thus continues to be linked to a fundamental belief in the apostasy of anything that inherently subverts canonical Christian theology, especially with regard to healing and mystical knowledge. (The linking of witches and vampires to Satan serves to incorporate Judaic belief as Christian prehistory while denying Judaism any status in the argument about the nature of evil.) The threat posed by both the witch and the vampire has to do with their special knowledge, acquired through contact with the dead: the witch has the ability to foretell and thus control the future, while the unholy vampire is somehow able to return from the dead without the permission of Jesus or his clergy. This threat, ultimately, goes to the very foundation of Christian eschatology. Such knowledge also directly challenges the uniqueness and absolute power of Christ. It would appear that however rational the post-Enlightenment societies of Europe and the Americas consider themselves, there persists a broad concept of evil as whatever is taken at the time to be anti-Christian.

At the time of this writing, the term *evil* has been applied more publicly not so much to individual folkloric or literary/cinematic horror figures as to large groups of people whose political agendas threaten to undermine the very foundation of some “way of life.” Thus, where once the Soviet Union was labeled an “evil empire,” when that atheistic and politically opposing force went underground only to be replaced by non-Western opposition to the imperatives of late international capitalism, certain countries that now dare challenge Western nuclear hegemony have been publicly labeled the “axis of evil,” a wonderful phrase that even manages to invoke associations with the long-reigning symbol of absolute evil, Nazism. Furthermore, so-called Islamic extremism/fundamentalism/terrorism is now quite obviously emerging to replace the Soviet Union as the central sponsor of evil in the world. And lest we imagine that this labeling goes eastward only, the United States has found itself proclaimed by these same infidels to be a hypostasis of the Great Satan.

There is, of course, a presumption in all this that those groups who are calling the others evil should somehow be, if not above reproach, at least immune from reciprocal accusations. There is a cohering aspect to the word that binds its utterers ever more irrevocably to evil’s antithesis (as if evil itself could never say its own name) and thus permits a restora-

tion of well-being and order. To label something evil is to magically circumscribe it and to effectively push the obligation of proof of goodness onto the thing so designated. To define what constitutes anathema, to excommunicate *ex officio*, is of course to assert or reassert, with full authority, one's own unquestionable status as good. From the appropriate pulpit, to label something evil loudly enough is to provide perfect cover for any previous or subsequent actions that otherwise might be seen as unjust, intolerable, or even evil.

Alas, not all incarnations of evil are as identifiable as Osama bin Laden. There are evil effects that are not so well documented as the attacks on the World Trade Center. In some ways, these vaguer effects may induce a stronger, albeit subtler, sense of chaos than obvious (violent) aggression. For there is always the possibility that any violence and destruction leveled at us—or, as we now see, merely intended for us—is not necessarily evil but, rather, a form of retributive justice, whether human or divine. Against the ambiguously evil, embodied folklorically by simulacra of the human, such as the witch or the vampire, we desire heroes that are not bound by the mundane and banal perceptions of the politician or the soldier. If the magnetic needle indicating true evil can swing to any point on our relativistic moral compass, we need a force—a special person—who can be called on to orient it away from us, lest we be forced to look inward and see how we might not live up to the values we claim to uphold.

In the history of both Western and Eastern Europe—a political division that may be disputable on nationalistic grounds, but one that I hope is provisionally tolerable for all the evident historical and cultural differences between the two regions—there is a tradition with respect to vampires and witches of endowing select, marked individuals with the mystical power to identify, to actually see, the ambulatory evil that is resident within our community. These seers, who perhaps had provided something of a healing function in earlier millennia, over time used their powers, often for personal gain, to uncover the insidious evil carried by those members of the community that represented a threat to the common order and that were even more evil than most because they seemed to have so little real social power: witches, after all, were usually women, while vampires were always dead.

While there does seem to be some similarity in the way witches and

vampires have been regarded, these two figures in fact underwent quite different vicissitudes in the history of Europe, regardless of whether or not they had any sort of common religious ancestry. There is, however, a distinct and important historical flex point when the vampire moved from its natural ecology—Balkan, Orthodox, Slavic, and preliterate—into an adapted environment (a new host, if you will) whose characteristics are (Western) European, Catholic or Protestant, non-Slavic, and literate. As Gábor Klaniczay has pointed out, what seems to happen in the early eighteenth century is the replacement of a pattern of actual witch persecution with episodes of vampire hysteria and then the subsequent reportage, the transfer of the vampire from a folkloric entity to a symbolic literary type, capable of embodying metaphorically a host of shifting contemporary concepts of social evil.

We might hope that in the transfer of the image of the vampire from that of a dead excommunicated villager to that of an undead, urbane, if castle-dwelling, nobleman, the borrowers of this motif would have understood quite well the “scapegoat” nature of the vampire, such that they might then have used the vampire narrative to lay bare the modalities of injustice and blindness that pervade the scapegoat dynamic. But this did not happen at all. In fact, these otherwise learned borrowers of the vampire motif were themselves ignorant of the broader cultural system of which the folkloric vampire was but one not terribly significant part. Consequently, they tended to take the vampire’s presumed evil as authentic, not the result of a social compact in which an insentient corpse was reimagined as alive so that it could bear the projection of guilt and withstand the violence and humiliation enacted on it. It is almost as if, once the mechanism for projecting evil onto the figure of the witch had been suppressed in the name of anti-imaginal rationalism, the vampire came to stand in as the perfect defenseless target of collective violence, because the vampire’s evil—tied so permanently to the abject horror (adapting Kristeva’s notion) of the unholy returning corpse—would remain unquestionable.

This incessantly repeated victory over the simulacrum of the dead vampire, often engineered or initiated by a seer or slayer who has been granted special knowledge of the vampire’s true identity, is a complex mechanism that intentionally obscures the absence of certain values inherited from the Enlightenment, such as due process and the separa-

tion of church and state. This obscuration, I argue in these pages, is itself part of the mechanism by which ordinarily just or humane persons can come to subscribe to the collective attribution of evil in order to act out vengeance and rage on the abject body. The obscuring process continually recurs and may be accompanied by a translation of its essential features to a new object, a new land (e.g., across the Danube or across the narrative gulf from literature to film), where an imbalance in the system of social justice can once more go unrecognized for what it is. To further protect the perennial need to perform violence on a victim whose guilt must be unquestionable, a hero with special skills must come along, at least once into every age.



Acknowledgments

This book wraps up an investigation that began over thirty years ago, when I first naively became aware there were historical and folkloric antecedents to the vampires I had previously known only from literature and the movies. Only when my interests in both Slavic languages and vampires found their common justification in Jan Perkowski's works on Slavic vampirism did I realize that I should be looking not in Transylvania or Romania for the answers to my questions about this myth but, rather, in the Balkans. So it is first to "Mr. Perkowski" that I owe my gratitude, since without his insights, I could never have known what I did not know. It was at the University of Virginia that I met other Slavic scholars whose breadth and seriousness I would need to emulate, especially Natalie Kononenko and David Herman.

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Finally, the members of my family—Cynthia, Amy, and Jay—have lived with this vampire, now become a slayer, for many decades. To them I say, we have found his where.