

FROM TERRIFYING VILLAIN TO TRAGIC HERO: MIODRAG BULATOVIĆ'S PROBLEMATIC REHABILITATION OF THE HISTORICAL DRACULA

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Abstract The present study analyses the novel *Death's Lover* (1990) by the Yugoslav writer Miodrag Bulatović. The main character is the controversial figure Vlad Dracula, also known as Vlad the Impaler, a medieval Romanian prince. The first part of the study identifies the elements that remain true to the historical chronicle thereby giving the text the character of a documentary. From this point of view, the novel is a demystifying account of Dracula, the Western European-constructed fictional vampire, and a rehabilitation of the Eastern European historical figure Vlad the Impaler. The second part of the study identifies and analyzes the mechanics and belletristic discursive strategies which appear in the novel, among which are: the frame story structure and framing device; elements of psychological portraiture; the use of rhetorical figures such as hyperbole, allegory, antithesis; the creation of suspense; the existence of a plot twist; the alternation of first person narration with third person narration; the use of aesthetic and literary mechanisms such as understatement, irony and the grotesque. The result is a work of creative nonfiction that explores and reconstructs history through fictional means. The third part of the study explores the political and ideological motives underlying Bulatović's revalorization of Vlad Dracula, a cruel prince obsessed with battling the Ottoman Empire, in the context of the disintegration of Yugoslavia and the intensification of nationalist tendencies and ethnic cleansing.

Keywords Dracula, vampire, Vlad the Impaler, creative fiction, nonfiction novel, Romania, Transylvania, Yugoslavia, ethnic cleansing.

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Miodrag Bulatović (1930-1991) was a well-known Yugoslav writer whose prose style allies him in spirit with Nikolai Gogol and Franz Kafka with its phantasmagorical elements of folkloric origin, grotesque characters and absurd situations. In his investigation of the psychology of existential despair, Bulatović produces an artistic vision that is hallucinatory and brutal but also tragicomic with significant notes of magical realism unfolding across a Yugoslavian landscape. His main theme of life in Montenegro during and after World War II is presented in a naturalistic manner, tending towards the degenerative in the way in which individual existence is grotesquely reduced to its rudimentary biological function.

In 1990, Bulatović published a serialized documentary-style novel in the newspaper *Politika*, whose main character is Vlad III Dracula, a.k.a. Vlad the Impaler, a medieval Romanian prince. The ensemble of the instalments resulted in *Death's Lover* (Serbian: *Ljubavnik smrti*), a little-known and unstudied novel featuring the historical prince considered to be the prototype of Bram Stoker's vampire Dracula. In the novel Bulatović produces a style that is – and is not – characteristic of him. On the one hand, he creates a chronicle of Vlad the Impaler's life according to the historical facts which seems, at first glance, to deviate from his usual turn toward the bizarre and the pathological in favour of writing as a documentarian. On the other hand, he is so fascinated by the Romanian prince and by the legends swirling around him that he assumes the role of historical commentator and, indeed, rehabilitator, without entirely giving up his fictional methods and the features of his unmistakable style. The result is an unusual novel that explores and reconstructs history through fictional means.

The present study is organized in two main parts. The first part identifies the elements that correspond to the historical chronicle, faithfully evoking the past in a way to confer upon the text the character of a history-chronicle. From this point of view, *Death's Lover* demystifies the Western European-created fictional vampire Dracula and rehabilitates the Eastern European historical Dracula, one based on primary sources and intensive documentation. The second part identifies and analyzes the belletristic discursive mechanisms that emerge in Bulatović's chronicle. Although he makes an incursion into the real history of Vlad the Impaler, the author does not resist fictionalizing methods, making it a good example of creative nonfiction as described by Lee Gutkind:

“In creative nonfiction, writers can be poetic and journalistic simultaneously. Creative nonfiction writers are encouraged to utilize fictional (literary) techniques in their prose – from scene to dialogue to description to point-of-view – and be cinematic at the same time. Creative nonfiction writers write about themselves and/or capture real people and real life in ways that can and

have changed the world. What is most important and enjoyable about creative nonfiction is that it not only allows but encourages the writer to become part of the story or essay being written. The personal involvement creates a special magic that alleviates the suffering and anxiety of the writing experience; it provides many outlets for satisfaction and self-discovery, flexibility and freedom.”¹

Furthermore, Barbara Lounsberry, in her study *The art of fact: contemporary artists of nonfiction*, identifies the four hallmarks of creative nonfiction: i) a subject taken from the real world, not invented; ii) ample documentation; iii) realistic descriptions faithfully reconstituting the contexts of the events; and iv) the use of the modalities of narrative prose.² These are precisely the conditions fulfilled in *Death's Lover*. Bulatović utilizes both narrative and fictional strategies to produce a creative nonfiction novel that is lively and exciting.

Death's Lover contains 23 chapters and is constructed as a frame within a frame. The novel has two time frames: i) the past (Chapters V-XIX) is a chronicle of the 15th century, “the period of terror,”³ as related by the historian-narrator who reconstitutes the life and times of Vlad the Impaler and whose voice the reader identifies with the author Bulatović; ii) the present (Chapters I-IV, VIII and XX-XXIII) is the travel journal of the narrator who comes to post-communist Romania in order to research the Middle Ages that fascinate him and where he follows in the footsteps of Vlad the Impaler: “I count myself among those who are possessed by the Middle Ages, because they were fierce, bloody and mystical. The mystery has persisted since the beginning of time.”⁴ Already in the introductory chapters the narrator-author calls himself the chronicle-creator, assuming for himself the role of historian-commentator, preoccupied with verifying the information he offers. The present frames the past, which is to say that the novel begins with the present journey, then turns to follow the chronicle and references to the historic past, and in the end returns to the present. Thus, the reader sees an alternation and an interpenetration of historical and fictional discourses, each with their specific traits, as described by the literary critic Hayden White: “Historical discourse wages

¹ Lee Gutkind, “Creative Nonfiction: A Movement, Not a Moment,” *Creative Nonfiction*, 29 (2006): 6-7.

² Barbara Lounsberry, *The art of fact: contemporary artists of nonfiction* (Westport: Greenwood, 1990).

³ Miodrag Bulatović, *Amantul morții* [*Death's lover*], Romanian edition, trans. by Mariana Ștefănescu, with an introduction by Eugen Uricariu and an afterword by Mariana Ștefănescu (Bucharest: Paralela 45, 2003), 25. All citations are from this edition. The translations into English are mine.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 9.

everything on the true, while fictional discourse is interested in the real – which it approaches by way of an effort to fill out the domain of the possible or imaginable.”⁵

Finally, Bulatović’s interest in the Romanian prince has its own significant historical context. In the final part of this study the problematic rehabilitation of Vlad the Impaler in *Death’s Lover* will be set against the backdrop of the breakup of Yugoslavia and the ethnic conflicts of the 1990s.

The Chronicle and Historical Authenticity

The historical chronicle starts with the birth and ends with the death of Vlad III Dracula,⁶ the so-called Vlad the Impaler (Romanian: *Vlad Țepeș* from *țepă* ‘stake’). It focuses on the complicated domain of the Romanian prince and the fights for power in Wallachia. The action takes place in the 15th century, that is, during in the lifetime of Vlad the Impaler (1431-1476) in the Romanian principalities of Wallachia, Transylvania and Moldavia. The Romanian towns of Brașov and Sibiu are recorded, as well as cities outside the Romanian sphere, namely Budapest, Istanbul and Visegrád. Events are related in chronological order, the narrative thread is logical and coherent, and the toponyms and geographical spaces are recognizable. In this way, the novel’s principal theme is history, more precisely the reestablishment of historical truth. The narrator-author assures the reader – whom he convinces by examples and citations – that his reconstitution is based on Romanian, Turkish, Scandinavian, Venetian, Hungarian and Austrian chronicles, all kept in the Vatican Library, as well as in other European institutions: “European archives preserve precious documents concerning the life of Vlad Țepeș Dracula. No other dignitary of the 15th century enjoyed such celebrity.”⁷ He investigates legends and myths as well: “In clarifying Dracula’s fate not only will history have its say but also legends, be they Germanic, Slavic, Turkish or Romanian.”⁸

⁵ Hayden White, “Introduction: Historical fiction, fictional history, and historical reality,” *Rethinking History*, 9: 2-3 (2005), 147.

⁶ The name Dracula (in Romanian *Drăculea*) comes from the official title of Vlad III. In Romanian, *dracul* means ‘the devil’. However, researchers note that the name derives from the Order of the Dragon that the father of Vlad III, Vlad II Dracul, joined in 1431. See Kurt Treptow, *Vlad III Dracula: The life and times of the Historical Dracula* (Iași: The Center for Romanian Studies, 2000); Nicolae Stoicescu, *Vlad Țepeș* (Bucharest: Editura Academiei Republicii Socialiste România, 1976).

⁷ Miodrag Bulatović, *Death’s lover...*, 102.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 29.

The chronicle reveals step by step the life and political activities of the prince. It begins with his birth under signs of sombre omens which give rise to a host of negative myths about the man. The newborn seems to have appeared under the sign of a curse: "Already from his first day of life, says the legend, the boy had sharp fingernails, an unshamed and elongated rod between his legs, lips firm and sealed, not to mention the presence of teeth at birth."⁹ At the age of twelve, Vlad and his younger stepbrother, Radu the Handsome, are sent away from their father, Vlad II Dracula, to the Ottoman Court, as guarantees of submission, as "deluxe" hostages. The two boys spend their adolescence there together but with different trajectories. Vlad concentrates on his studies and on a military career; he finds the Turks' sexual orgies and their homosexual advances disgusting and promises to avenge himself for the constant abuses ("in any punished Turk he sees the subjugation of the Devil"¹⁰). By contrast, Radu, described by Bulatović as "neither man, nor woman, but a bit of one and the other,"¹¹ becomes the lover of Mehmed II the Conqueror, remains at the Ottoman Court and converts to Islam. Vlad returns to Wallachia during a difficult period of the expansion of the Ottoman Empire in the Balkans (which include the present-day countries of Albania, Bulgaria, Greece, half of Romania, Serbia, and half of Hungary). His aim is to fight against the Turks and stop the expansion.

Bulatović offers a brief history of the three reigns of Vlad the Impaler (1448, 1456-1462 and 1476), which were interrupted by successive ousters due to numerous plots. Although Vlad conducted many successful campaigns against the Turks, internal betrayals caused him to repeatedly lose his reigns, and it is to these successive wins and losses of the crown that Bulatović directs his attention. Each time Vlad returned to the throne he practiced intense external politics, ending and annulling talks with the Turks and Hungarians. He struck fear in the Turks whom he shocked with his atrocities and unimaginable torture which he imposed in order to punish them ("a devastating spirit for the armies of his enemies"¹²). Foremost, among these atrocities, was his most frequent and preferred method of "staking." Writes Bulatović: "There seems to be an impressive catalogue of torture invented by the Wallachian prince which has made history. I must admit that this Dracula's inventiveness preoccupies me more than his political and diplomatic career."¹³ The prince practiced similarly intense internal politics by severely

⁹ Ibid., 32.

¹⁰ Ibid., 76.

¹¹ Ibid., 34.

¹² Ibid., 119.

¹³ Ibid., 64.

sanctioning those who did not accept his vision, those who betrayed him at any time, as well as those he suspected of betrayal. There are records of the public executions of the boyars whom the prince considered traitors.

Vlad the Impaler's relationships were as precarious with Matthias Corvinus, King of Hungary, as with his own boyars. And all the more so with *Sași* merchants, that is, the Transylvanian Saxons,¹⁴ whom the Prince of Wallachia punished with torture as often as possible because of unpaid taxes. These merchants, by the way, are the ones who proliferated the myth of the vampire Dracula, using it to stigmatise the prince: "In the engravings of the time Vlad the Impaler is depicted as a crazy person with sadistic manners who massacred human bodies, flinging them afterwards into steaming boilers. It seems that these delinquent *Sași* had an unstoppable imagination. In fact, these pamphlets, these rough denunciations, spread their bad news like wildfire."¹⁵ Because of Vlad's bad reputation, European powers were reticent to offer aid to help him either in his crusades or the time he was captured by Matthias Corvinus on a false accusation of betrayal and held in Hungary for twelve years. As a result of his incarceration, Europe had a more difficult time fending off the Turks. After being given his freedom to resume his fight against the Turks, Vlad was assassinated by his stepbrother, Radu the Handsome, on the order of Mehmed II the Conqueror. (Other accounts say he was murdered by his own boyars).

The principal mode of exposition of this chronicle is sequential narration. Bulatović illustrates Vlad the Impaler's internal politics in terms of the infighting in Wallachia, Transylvania and Moldavia, and he casts the dynamics of Vlad's external politics in the context of defence against the Turkish invasion. He narrates different episodes of the atrocious revenge Vlad takes against his enemies, both internal and external, the tactics of intimidation he employed, and his vicious methods of penance.

In the present time frame which opens the novel, the narrator-author crosses the Yugoslavian-Romanian border to enter Romania by train (thus symbolically going back in time), travelling in the footsteps of the historic Dracula. Bulatović does not consider himself a casual traveller, but rather an initiate, a professional in the history of the Romanians: "A pilgrim such as me is a kind apart. I have a specific aim, a duty. After reading so many books about the country in which I now find myself, especially history books, I can no longer simply be a tourist."¹⁶ On the train, he engages in a discussion with a theologian, a doctoral student from

¹⁴ The *Sași* [Saxons] are a German ethnic group who colonized parts of Transylvania in the 12th and 13th centuries.

¹⁵ Miodrag Bulatović, *Death's lover...*, 43-44.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 10.

Belgrade, which serves not only as a pretext for a polemic about the personality of Vlad the Impaler, but also as a statement of the traveller-narrator's obsession: "Let's return to the character who obsesses me, the Wallachian Prince Vlad Țepeș."¹⁷ Here, he also defines the scope of the chronicle: "To reveal the infamies woven around a person who for centuries it seems cannot protect himself with his deeds, much less disavow his infamy."¹⁸ And again: "To rehabilitate the name and reputation of a personality by delving into historical documentation."¹⁹ In this time frame, namely that of his travels through contemporary Romania, the narrator journeys through the towns of Timișoara, Bucharest and Brașov. This Yugoslav traveller, well-armed with documentation, distinguishes between historical truth and his fictionalizing. For example, he arrives at Bran Castle in Transylvania, which is presented to tourists as Dracula's Castle to this very day and with which Vlad the Impaler had no ties whatsoever.²⁰ He notes: "We have arrived at Dracula's famous castle, known to me through reproductions, which was never, in fact, the fortress of Vlad the Impaler."²¹ Bulatović subsequently offers a medley of impressions concerning people and places: the social and economic state of Romania after the 1989 Revolution; the fall of the Ceaușescu regime, commercial and ethnographic commentary, his interactions with the locals, the stories related to Romanians after the Communist period, his interest in Romanian culture and civilization, his respect for local legend. He opines, "A population lives as long as their legends survive."²² And "A modest and patient population, whose spirituality is near and dear to my heart."²³ It is of note that the translator of the Romanian edition comments in the afterword of the novel on Bulatović's unusual interest in Romania: "I met Bulatović in the autumn of 1990 in Belgrade, having been invited to the international symposium of translators organized by the PEN-Club. On this occasion, he spoke to me with passion and warmth about his book about Vlad, written with devotion with respect to everything regarding Romanian culture and civilization."²⁴

¹⁷ Ibid., 11.

¹⁸ Ibid., 14.

¹⁹ Ibid., 15.

²⁰ Tuomas Hovi has a pertinent study of tourism in Romania based on the myth of Dracula: "The use of history in Dracula Tourism in Romania," *Folklore*, 57 (2014): 55-78.

²¹ Miodrag Bulatović, *Death's lover...*, 50.

²² Ibid., 37.

²³ Ibid., 50.

²⁴ Mariana Ștefănescu, "Postface: Balkan stories in the European context" in Miodrag Bulatović, *Death's lover...*, 126-127.

Although he recognizes the inconveniences of Vlad the Impaler's personality, Bulatović-the-traveler affirms that his desire to write the chronicle stems from a need to understand the vindictive spirit of the Romanian prince and to present his qualities as the protector of Wallachia, his remarkable ability to strategize and his firm and courageous spirit: "This chronicle, like a beacon, should be understood as an impulse of its author to rehabilitate the name and reputation of a personality through historical documentation."²⁵ In the present timeframe, particularly in Chapter IV, Bulatović brings up the vampire myth, which he considers to be wrongly tied to the historical Vlad Dracula. Bulatović considers the popularity of the Dracula of Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1807) to be a disservice to the actual historical person: "The invented image of Stoker's Dracula is in total disaccord with the historical figure."²⁶ And again: "Bram Stoker took a Wallachian name and misused it. The Dracula of the novel is a sweet kid when compared to the historical figure whose hands dripped with blood."²⁷

Without proposing to unpack the relationship between the fictional and the historical Dracula, it is worth emphasizing – which, indeed, Bulatović does – the lack of correspondence between these two characters from beginning to end, given that Stoker is a fiction writer who subjectively selected several real elements of the historical Dracula to create his fictional one. As Gerald Walker and Lorraine Wright note in their study of *Dracula's* location: "In order to create a setting for *Dracula*, Stoker researched and presented a vision of Transylvania that was indeed superficially realistic. The places he refers to are usually located approximately where he presents them."²⁸ Walker and Wright continue:

"Transylvania serves as the mythic centre of the Dracula tale. Its mountains, forests, deep valleys, and extraordinary scenery all play significant roles in the evocation of mystery and horror, especially as the story opens. Transylvania is also the scene for the novel's final resolution. The encounter between ancient superstition and modern science is, rather, significantly, set in their frontier between east and west, modernity and the ancient world."²⁹

²⁵ Miodrag Bulatović, *Death's lover...*, 15.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 120.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 121.

²⁸ Gerald Walker, Lorraine Wright, "Locating Dracula: Contextualizing the geography of Transylvania," in *Bram Stoker's Dracula: Sucking through the Century, 1897-1997*, ed. Carol Margaret Davison (Toronto: Dundun Press, 1997), 69.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 52.

However, it is important to note that the real Vlad the Impaler lived not in Transylvania, but rather in Wallachia, as Bulatović well knows.

The myth of Dracula is a powerful one, and Bulatović does not challenge the force and power of its attraction: “Dracula was, it is true, much more than a vampire, for all that he shed streams of blood, I admit that even I felt breathless to discover all the strange events starring our hero Dracula.”³⁰ Margaret L. Carter explains that this myth creates an inferiority complex among the writers who take up the theme and thereby affirm it: “Virtually all twentieth-century vampire fiction labours under an ‘anxiety of influence’ with regard to *Dracula*. The individual author need not have read Stoker’s novel or even seen one of the many films based on it. The figure of Dracula pervades our culture’s conception of vampirism.”³¹ A pertinent explanation of the vampire myth is offered by still other literary critics. For instance: “The vampire disrupts because it brings the past into the present and challenges human temporal, normative experience.”³² And “The vampire metaphor injects mystery into the mythology of evil.”³³

The above-named characteristics apply to the fictional Dracula, and Bulatović, fully aware of them, firmly puts them to the side, emphasizing them as examples of “vampirism inflation”³⁴ and “poetic license.”³⁵ The real Dracula for Bulatović was a prince undermined by hypocritical subjects and used by other rulers to stop the Turkish invasion. Of the hypocritical subjects he writes: “With the risk of disappointing my readers, I maintain that Vlad did not suck human blood. He shed a lot of blood that others licked, the same ones who will lick anything.”³⁶ Of his misuse by other rulers comes the comment: “From this date the Hungarian king will caricature the brave Wallachian as a mascot for stakes and dead bodies.”³⁷

³⁰ Miodrag Bulatović, *Death’s lover...*, 114.

³¹ Margaret L. Carter, “Share alike: *Dracula* and the sympathetic vampire in Mid-Twentieth Century pulp fiction,” in *Bram Stoker’s Dracula: Sucking through the Century...*, 178.

³² Jerome de Groot, *Remaking history: the past in contemporary historical fictions* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 130.

³³ Livy Visano, “*Dracula* as a contemporary ethnography: a critique of mediated moralities and mysterious mythologies,” in *Bram Stoker’s Dracula: Sucking through the Century...*, 332.

³⁴ Miodrag Bulatović, *Death’s lover...*, 115.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 28.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 102.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 94.

Creative Nonfiction Strategies

In his novel, Bulatović combines objective dates and documentaries with aesthetic subjectivity and fictional means. The author shows his ability to approach historical events with the virtuosity of a writer of fiction in a process well described by Phillip Lopate:

“For all their shared boundaries, the experiences of fiction and nonfiction are fundamentally different. In the traditional short story or novel, a fictive space is opened up that allows you the reader to disappear into the action, even to the point of forgetting you are reading. In the best nonfiction, it seems to me, you’re always made aware that you are being engaged with a supple mind at work. The story line or plot in nonfiction consists of the twists and turns of a thought process working itself out.”³⁸

In *Death’s Lover*, Bulatović engages a particular and characteristic artistic discourse which goes beyond any nonfictional basis which transforms his text with its documentary aim into a story that is lively, attractive and even cinematographic. From this point of view, *Death’s Lover*, despite its nonfictional appearance, fulfils the conditions of fictional attraction synthesized, once again, by Lopate:

“What makes me want to keep reading a nonfiction text is the encounter with a surprising, well-stocked mind as it takes on the challenge of the next sentence, paragraph, and thematic problem it has set for itself. The other element that keeps me reading nonfiction happily is an evolved, entertaining, elegant, or at least highly intentional literary style. The pressure of style should be brought to bear on every passage.”³⁹

The most important narrative strategies Bulatović wields in his chronicle of Vlad the Impaler include: the existence of a backstory; the use of a narrative hook; the structure of a frame and a framing device; the inclusion of psychological portraiture; the use of literary figures of speech such as hyperbole, allegory, and antithesis; the creation of suspense and the appearance of a plot twist; the presence of an unreliable narrator; and the use of aesthetic categories and

³⁸ Phillip Lopate, *To show and to tell: the craft of literary nonfiction* (New York: Free Press, 2013), 13.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

mechanisms such as understatement, irony and the grotesque. Each of these strategies will be discussed in turn.

The novel-chronicle contains a backstory, concentrated in Chapter II-III, in which the narrator presents the European political context in which rulers such as Vlad the Impaler appeared. It begins with the Great Schism of 1054, the rupture between Latin Christianity and its Greek counterpart, and extends to the Turkish assault on Europe and the Fall of Constantinople. The narrator expressively describes the terror generated by the Ottoman Empire and the expansion and ravages perpetrated by the Turks: "All of these preliminary considerations are made with the intention of making better known the era in which lived Vlad the Impaler, Dracula, a Wallachian prince."⁴⁰ This introductory part also includes a narrative hook which grabs the reader's attention. The narrator gradually arrives to the idea at the basis of the novel: Vlad the Impaler was obsessed with punishing the Turks and with any form of betrayal, including by Romanians. A narrative hook appears in Chapter IV as well, when the narrator introduces the image of Vlad Dracula as "a sado-masochistic prince."⁴¹ This prototype of the vampire was a myth proliferated, as Bulatović shows, by Saxon merchants and by the Turks, in order to stigmatize the Romanian prince who terrorized them. Bulatović shows both hooks at work in the reception of Vlad the Impaler as Dracula: "The concept of Dracula was, for some, the spectre of a tyrant's tyrant, executioner and vampire, and for others the model of judicial and civic authority, a fighter for the ideals of Christianity, for rights and cleanliness."⁴²

The structure of the novel itself, namely the frame story / framing device, is a fictional mechanism. As noted above, the author sets the action in the European Middle Ages but not before opening the story in the present, namely in Yugoslavia of the early 1990s. The book begins with the author's train trip to Romania to discover the "old haunts" of Vlad the Impaler with whom he is obsessed. As mentioned above, he engages in a discussion with a young theologian who, like the author, is travelling to Bucharest and with whom he exchanges knowledge about the history of the 15th and 16th centuries. Here, Bulatović creates temporal distancing through the spatial distancing of the train ride, explained by Hamish Dalley, who analyzes representations of the past: "A concept sometimes invoked is the idea of 'distance' – a spatial metaphor that names the conceptual separation between past and present assumed to be a precondition of historical

⁴⁰ Miodrag Bulatović, *Death's lover...*, 28.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 102.

understanding.”⁴³ In Chapter VIII, Bulatović creates distance by making a break in the chronicle and returning to the present, to the journey following in the footsteps of the historical Dracula. These back-and-forth switches between the temporal planes create not only distancing but also an energizing rhythm to the story which could have become monotonous if there had been no break in the chronicle.

Bulatović constructs an impressive and lively literary portrait of Vlad the Impaler, as much physical as intellectual, using numerous elements of dramatic visualization. The physical portrait taken from the legend is placed, from birth to maturity, under the sign of the devil. As mentioned above, Vlad was supposedly born with “sharp fingernails, firm and sealed lips, and fangs instead of teeth.”⁴⁴ Adolescent Vlad was “a towering fellow, handsome, with a huge phallus and sharp teeth.”⁴⁵ The adult had “sunken cheeks, thin lips, and long locks to his shoulders.”⁴⁶ He was “not very tall, but sturdy and powerful, with a sour look, and a straight nose with prominent nostrils. A dry and rather rubicund face with large and open green eyes above which hovered bushy eyebrows.”⁴⁷ As for his intellectual portrait, the narrator offers it directly, often with notes of irony directed at the prince’s detractors: “Vlad Țepeș Dracula amounted to more than just his preference for staking, since he was a cultivated person who wrote well, knew several languages and mastered many doctrines, among which was the military.”⁴⁸ Bulatović calls him a “perfect strategist, a fine tactician,”⁴⁹ claiming that the prince inaugurated the strategy of guerrilla warfare in medieval Romania. He was said to be “the fear and terror of the Turks.”⁵⁰ He “set fire to all he encountered in his way, destroying the fortresses of the Ottoman Empire.”⁵¹ He was “the only protector from the Turks.”⁵² He led “an unruly force.”⁵³ He was “the authentic and brave warrior for Christian ideals.”⁵⁴ He was

⁴³ Hamish Dalley, “Temporal systems in representations of the past: distance, freedom and irony in historical fiction,” in Kate Mitchell, Nicola Parsons, *Reading historical fiction: the revenant and remembered past* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 33.

⁴⁴ Miodrag Bulatović, *Death’s lover...*, 8.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 87.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 57.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 73.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 88.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 87.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 99.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 100.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 45.

furthermore “the judge and liberator”⁵⁵ who “believed only in human and divine rights, in God in man, for which he strove to labour.”⁵⁶ Vlad was well educated and knew Hebrew, Arabic, Latin, Turkish and Greek. At the same time, he was schooled in tourneys and competitions, and he had knowledge of economics, politics, Oriental philosophy, magic and occultism. Bulatović enters his character’s mind and turns him into a reflective thinker, endowed with the messianic purpose of protecting Christian Wallachia: “God put the crown on his head.”⁵⁷ “Justice has come to you ... in torments is God, and in God dwells revenge and my rights.”⁵⁸ The characterization of Vlad the Impaler, be it physical or intellectual, is constructed with the help of stylistic figures, among which the most often encountered are comparisons, epithets and hyperbole: “Vlad the Impaler, a man with cheekbones with bruises like a whirlwind of water in the middle of the night, with eyes like no one has ever seen before, so was he painted by the chronicler of the Vatican, as a lunatic, a moon creature ... he was fierce, bloody, mystic.”⁵⁹

Hyperbole figures into the psychological effect which Vlad’s cruelty had on the Turks, the Hungarians, the Saxons and his own boyars. Bulatović insists on Vlad’s need for multiple revenges – Vlad’s terrible revenge on the traitorous boyars and Romanian rulers which undermined him and his revenge on the Turks: “Thousands and thousands of Turks were put to the stake ... This kind of torture is unique in the world. According to specialists and encyclopaedists, no human being had ever been subjected to such torture, neither until Dracula nor after him.”⁶⁰ His aggression, cruelty and appetite for torture are characteristics of Vlad that Bulatović does not ignore: “His destiny seems to be under the sceptre of crime” and “He liked to attend the death of the condemned until the very end, until he was sure he could no longer hear the breathing of the condemned.”⁶¹

As for the allegorical features the portrait, he narrator insists on the symbolic elements defining Vlad’s character: the stake, as the instrument of torture which made him famous; the throne as the image of power, for which the boyars, the Turks and the Hungarians hated and harassed him; the prison where the prince spent twelve years in Hungary, as a symbol of repression, but also as the one fed his thirst for revenge: “The omnipotent Vlad Țepeș, the fear and terror of the Turks, languished in prison day and

⁵⁵ Ibid., 13.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 81.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 87.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 87.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 9.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 75.

⁶¹ Ibid., 64.

night with dreams and nightmares. The jailers record that the prisoner, even when he slept, gazed with reddened eyes, naked, standing with his hands spread against the wall⁶²; the sun which symbolises the Christian ideal, the divine; a premonition dream (Vlad's mother had nightmares before her son's birth and is horrified by her newborn's appearance). The title of the novel completes this allegorical portrait: Vlad the Impaler is the death's lover who has a vicious and clandestine relationship with death, of which he is not afraid. Quite the contrary, he seeks it out in horrible and terrifying forms: "He was and remains a devotee of death. A devoted lover of death."⁶³

Bulatović frequently uses antithesis, beginning with Vlad the Impaler v. Radu the Handsome. Vlad was preoccupied with protecting Romanian and Christian territories, while his brother was devoted to the Turks: "Radu the Handsome, a negative character in our chronicle, two years younger than Vlad, will end up being a traitor."⁶⁴ Vlad the Impaler was the protector of Christianity, while Mehmed II was "a satyr and sexual pluralist."⁶⁵ And the final irony: "Mehmed will know the peak of glory, being named the Conqueror, while Vlad, the true hero in the 15th century, will be 'blessed' with the title of Vampire."⁶⁶

The narration is at times suspenseful, so that the chronicle has anticipatory moments and narrative tension. Bulatović creates suspense by intentionally delaying the telling of various episodes. He often takes the metatextual step of abruptly interrupting the narrative thread with the promise of relating it later: "Even now the Serbs are finding out about Vlad Țepeș Dracula, but about all this a little later."⁶⁷ And "But about this, later."⁶⁸ Further, "If we weren't afraid to deviate from the narrative thread which follows the life of our hero, we could reproduce many fragments from the Moldavian-Polish correspondence."⁶⁹ Or, again, "One could reproach me for not having presented the situation from the war front."⁷⁰

Similarly, every chapter has an exciting title of a metaphoric-moralizing character: "Time of Terror," "Born Under a Bloody Sun," "The Law of Violence Permits Anything,"

⁶² Ibid., 85.

⁶³ Ibid., 76.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 34.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 23.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 22.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 17.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 34.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 77.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 90.

“Master of the Pen and the Stake.” And every chapter is preceded by an expressive epigraph, allegoric, which synthesizes the contents and captures attention: “The Clair de Lune Blurry with Tears,” “The Earth Seemed to Want to Take it from the Beginning,” “A Farce Worthy of Shakespeare,” “Only Ivan the Terrible Can Be Compared to Him.” Bulatović occasionally inserts a romantic story in order to humanize Vlad the Impaler. In his adolescence, on his way to the Ottoman Court, he falls in love with a young Armenian girl, Maria, of modest origins, to whom he remains attached for life, despite the amorous escapades he is supposed to have had: “Our hero, Vlad, confessed eternal love to her, and the girl, through sighs, told him that she would wait, as it is believed in Armenian fairy tales, until the grave and after death.”⁷¹ Bulatović goes so far to assert: “There is no doubt that Vlad Țepeș hid his palpitating intimate life, too full of voluptuousness, in order not to desecrate his secret love for the Armenian Maria.”⁷²

The creation of suspense also contributes to the plot twist. For example, the narrator gradually reveals – or rather masks – along the way the tension between Vlad and his younger brother, Radu the Handsome, who sided with the Turks and who will later betray Vlad (as mentioned above, Bulatović champions Radu the Handsome as the assassin who cut off Vlad’s head; other chronicles claim that the boyars did him in). Radu’s betrayal is not the only instance of a twist in the unfolding intrigue: Bulatović constructs a feverish and frightening recurring game of betrayal, of political practices in this period, which the reader follows with fascination.

The chronicle alternates between first person narration and third person narration, thereby enlivening the discourse. On the one hand, the narration in the third person relates Vlad’s life and times, offered by a well informed and documented narrator-chronicler, who tries to remain objective. On the other hand, this same narrator becomes subjective and unreliable when falling into the trap of the magnetism he feels for his so-called hero and shifts to first-person narration: “Let me return to the character who obsesses me...”⁷³ Also, “Vlad Țepeș Dracula, the mighty hero of the bloody 15th century, gives me no peace. I cannot value him simply as an example of an era with a macabre vocation. I am not a historian but rather a novelist who is attracted to miracles, real and apparent. Just as I am preoccupied with veritable vampires.”⁷⁴ A subjective intervention occurs in the last chapter, XXIII, which returns to the present

⁷¹ Ibid., 35.

⁷² Ibid., 56.

⁷³ Ibid., 11.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 13.

frame of the story. Bulatović expresses his positive sentiments for Romania, its landscapes and Christian symbols: “Here is the country of Vlad Țepeș, a treasury of sights blessed by God, a country of soul!”⁷⁵ The narrator’s personal commentaries refer to the historical sources: “If we are to believe the legend” “And why not say it...” However, he exceeds the objective framework when he empathetically explains the facts about Vlad the Impaler, who he transforms into a literary character subject to psychological analysis: “Vlad will pursue his brother with insane rage...”⁷⁶ And “The father wept quietly, saying that there was no happier parent in the world.”⁷⁷

The novel-chronicle becomes dynamic through the relationship that the narrator-author forges with his readers. The narrator directly addresses the reader for whom he wishes to create the impression of honesty with respect to the events, and to make the reader the co-author of the chronicle: “So I’m talking to you, and you who are following me, it’s up to us to go back in time together.”⁷⁸ He writes, “Our chronicle, which set itself the modest goal of uncovering the infamies which have been woven around a person who, across the ages, cannot defend himself through the facts, and thus to disavow the blasphemy.”⁷⁹ He compliments his audience, “By the way, my subtle readers can confirm...”⁸⁰ On occasion, the subjective narrator does not hesitate to declare his not entirely credible and limited position: “I myself don’t feel able to take the long line of years seriously, fearing that I might bore my readers with my oppressive chronicle. Although I must recognize that my imagination has always been aroused by shadows.”⁸¹ With some resignation and even some sarcasm, he writes: “Even with all the good intentions of the chronicler, it is still not possible to recompose the real existence of the Wallachian prince, whom Europe, in its generosity, blessed with the nickname Vampire.”⁸² The flux of the discourse, interrupted at times by personal considerations and a casual speech style, offers authenticity and naturalness.

Another fictionalising procedure in the novel is the aesthetic category of the grotesque. Bulatović describes Vlad the Impaler as having an abnormal personality, shocking, oversized, in order to exploit the terrifying side of the grotesque. The author uses the grotesque

⁷⁵ Ibid., 13.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 33.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 34.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 14.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 18.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 38.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid., 28.

when describing the lifestyle of the Ottoman Empire, in which homosexuality and sexual orgies with minors were common. In these representations, the author relies on the caricatural-ridicule of the grotesque. Bulatović's references to the sexual practices of the Turks are frequent and contemptuous.

Although Bulatović does not deny Vlad's maniacal starts – "Vlad Țepeș was probably a sado-masochist"⁸³ – his tendency is to attenuate them through the rhetorical figure of understatement. He tries to polemicize the cruelty of the Romanian prince who gave rise to so many myths and sinister legends by foregrounding the context of a terrifying century. Vlad was a cruel leader who committed many atrocities, and yet the narrator's frequent interventions, with explanations and clarifications, create rather the image of a tragic leader, defeated by history – the narrator goes so far as to call him a "Shakespearean hero" – who responded with brutality to the brutalities and social crises of his time: "All chronicles recognize his unbelievable cruelty. In fact, he was unbelievable in everything."⁸⁴ And "his was a diabolical cruelty, but he had justice in his blood."⁸⁵ Bulatović emphasizes Vlad the Impaler's patriotic intentions, most importantly the protection of Wallachia against the Turks. In this way, Bulatović's view of Vlad approaches the home-grown Romanian feeling for their prince: "Wallachian legends never judge Vlad the Impaler's acts of revenge. The people and the teller are always on his side. The people always met him with enthusiasm."⁸⁶ The Romanians' concept is underlined by Tuomas Hovi, who studies the ways in which Romanian tourism has leveraged the myth of Dracula:

"In Romania, Vlad the Impaler has almost always been seen as a good ruler, harsh but just. Vlad has been seen as a national hero who defended his country and people against foreign and domestic threats. Outside Romania, his image has been a lot darker, that of a blood thirsty tyrant responsible for the lives of tens of thousands of people."⁸⁷

Bulatović's message seems to be that – beyond this cruel ruler's scrupleless Machiavellian imagination, around whom a negative legend has been constructed – his heroic side should be rehabilitated and valued. His notable deeds remain, in the opinion of the

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 118.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 114.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 109.

⁸⁷ Tuomas Hovi, "The use of history in Dracula Tourism in Romania...", 61.

narrator-author, absolute principles of justice, to serve the population, truth, and the defence of Christianity. Bulatović asks rhetorically: “But do you know how many churches Vlad the Impaler built, how many crosses he raised, how many nervous people he protected from the Turks?”⁸⁸ Bulatović presents the veridical, verified and historically validated harsh destiny of Vlad the Impaler, and seeks to ameliorate the facts of his cruelty and to justify them through his intention to protect his native ground from Ottoman dominion and Islamification. The novel’s translator into Romanian shows that Bulatović sees him as his hero, a scoundrel thirsty for carnage but also a free spirit preoccupied by far-reaching strategy. The translator comments that his “cruelty was a moral solution for cleansing the world.”⁸⁹ Bulatović’s focuses on the idea that in an area as politically effervescent as the Balkans in the Middle Ages, Vlad was an idealist with intransigent moral principles who could only be a loser around whom derogatory myths appear: “I have the impression that for all time humans have had the need of a vampire as a malefic symbol in the sense of infamy, with which they have always stigmatized someone.”⁹⁰

Profoundly attached to Romanian history and civilization and marshalling an array of fictional means, Miodrag Bulatović has written a fascinating novel of creative nonfiction about one of the most controversial personalities in medieval Romanian history, one who generates myths and legends until this day. The history of Dracula rewritten by Bulatović as creative nonfiction does not diminish the truth, because the novel is so thoroughly documented and attractively constructed.

And Now, The Problematic Part

Bulatović’s attraction to Vlad the Impaler inspires the question: Why? Why would a well-known Yugoslav novelist wish to “rehabilitate” a controversial medieval Romanian prince known for his cruelty? The answer lies in the novelist’s own political context.

Bulatović was a staunch member of the Socialist Party of Serbia which stood against other ethnic groups in Yugoslavia and particularly against the Bosnians who had converted to Islam after the conquest by the Ottoman Empire in the second half of the 15th century. In this context, Bulatović’s obsession with Vlad the Impaler derives from the Romanian prince’s fight with the peril of Islam represented by the Ottoman

⁸⁸ Miodrag Bulatović, *Death’s lover...*, 12.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 123.

invasion. It is of no little importance that Bulatović serialised his novel in *Politika*, a newspaper which, during the period of the breakup of Yugoslavia and the Yugoslav wars, was under the control of Slobodan Milošević and the Serbian communists. Kenneth Morrison explains how the attitude towards Muslims degenerated during this period:

“Once an essential pillar of Yugoslavism and the communist mantra of *bratstvo i jedinstvo* (brotherhood and unity), Muslims were increasingly reduced to the status of *Turci* (Turks) or *Poturice* (apostates). And as the SFRJ [Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia] began its slow demise, a creeping anti-Muslim discourse emerged in the Serbian and Montenegrin press (particularly *Politika*, *Politika ekspres* and *Pobjeda*), where Muslims were bluntly and indiscriminately depicted as ‘secessionists’, ‘fundamentalists’ or ‘extremists’, a potential *peta kolona* (fifth column).”⁹¹

The Turks of the Ottoman Empire are the stand-in for modern-day Muslims, and throughout his story Bulatović makes numerous and insistent deprecatory comments about them: “The Turks, the most perfidious and barbarous conquerors humankind has ever known.”⁹² “The Serbian Prince Karadjordje Petrović is supposed to have said: ‘Never trust the Turks!’”⁹³ And about their Islamizing efforts: “The Turks have no faith other than that of Mohammed.”⁹⁴

The author-chronicler, when commenting on the medieval history of the Balkans, does not once reproach the West for never truly implicating itself in the anti-Ottoman campaigns and for preferring to use local princes as shields: “It is suggested that someone else, obviously from the East, should shed his blood for the Occidental civilization.”⁹⁵ “Vlad the Impaler was used as a shield for the European Christian world.”⁹⁶ Bulatović makes important references recorded in Serbian history to the coalition between Vlad the Impaler and the Serbian nobleman Vuk Branković, who ruled the modern-day territories of

⁹¹ Kenneth Morrison, *Nationalism, identity and statehood in post-Yugoslav Montenegro* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), 57.

⁹² Miodrag Bulatović, *Death’s lover...*, 18.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 100.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 76.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 102.

southwest Serbia, the whole of Kosovo, the northern part of the Republic of Northern Macedonia and the north of Montenegro. Bulatović emphasizes the way Vlad the Impaler helped the Serbs by exterminating and then conquering the Turks who had occupied the fortress of Šabac and later the city of Srebrenica in 1476: “The Christian world will be glorified once again by Dracula after Srebrenica and Šabac.”⁹⁷ And again, “The battle of Šabac was grand, the torture inflicted on the Turks was never before seen and never before heard. At the very least, the Serbs should be grateful to he who liberated the fortress on the banks of the Sava River.”⁹⁸

Although the Bosnian War began in 1992, a year after Bulatović’s death, the idea of Serbian nationalism allied to a defence and justification of an ethnic cleansing of the Turks permeates *Death’s Lover*. Bulatović chose an apt historical figure in Vlad the Impaler to discuss the medieval history of the colonization and Islamification by the Ottoman Empire of what were, in Bulatović’s day, Yugoslavian territories, and thereby pressed on the problem of Yugoslavian national identity, which was in the process of disintegrating. In this context, the figure of Vlad the Impaler, the avenger, the ferocious protector of Christianity and the national spirit, he who terrorized the Turks and opposed Islam, finally enjoyed a pragmatic and problematic rehabilitation in the hands of Bulatović.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 91.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 92.