

Fragmented Identities in Circles of Fears and Desires

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Abstract: *What has always been considered indivisible, the individual, is, above all, fragmented. That fragmentation is celebrated through the figure of the vampire in the literary narratives of the XIX and XX centuries, hence the multiple identities of that tormented shadow. This tormented manner of being is the foundation of the permanent state of war typical of the constant tension between the way a person is and the way he/she would wish to be. The figure of the vampire subverts what Michel Maffesoli calls “the phantom of the self”, common in the Western tradition. To the French philosopher the dogmatic reason not only can but also needs to impose a unity. Feelings and affections, in their turn, drive us into a turbulence, a discomfort of multiplicity. Thus, the genealogy of the rebellious spirit presents us with a revolt against the conceptions of the individual as static. It is exactly the fact of being multiple in himself/herself that brings the individual to the lack of recognition of himself/herself in the social rigidity.*

Establishing a dialogue with Maffesoli’s theory, I shall analyse Bram Stoker’s novel Dracula (1887) and Heloísa Seixas’ short story “Íblis” (1995). These narratives converge as they both reveal the sombre side of our nature which, according to Maffesoli, though it can be domesticated by culture, it continues to enliven our desires, our fears, our feelings. Freud, Kristeva, Beauvoir and Foucault will help in the development of the ideas of the uncanny, abjection, identity, and sexuality.

It was only with John Polidori’s *The Vampyre* (1819) that English fiction first saw the appearance of the vampire. This novella consecrates the monster as a metaphor of transgression. However, while most critics agree in reading the vampire as a transgressive force, its psychological or social significance can vary according to cultural needs. *Dracula*, for instance, has been considered a tyrannical aristocrat who sought to preserve the survival of his house by threatening the security of the bourgeois family. On the other hand, according to a Marxist reading the vampire embodies the way in which human life nourishes the machine of capitalist production.

It is important to remember that 19th century vampires are not only aristocrats, but also seducers, hence their association with sexuality, policing the boundaries between 'normal' and 'deviant' sexuality.

In early vampire fiction, the representation of the vampire as monstrous, evil and other serves to guarantee the existence of good, reinforcing the formally dichotomized structures of belief which, although beginning to crumble under the impact of an increasingly secular and scientific world, still constituted the dominant worldview. However, by the end of the twentieth century, vampire fiction becomes more and more sceptical about such categories. There is no doubt that the figure of the vampire can still be seen as the incorporation of evil and otherness, but more usually the oppositions between good and evil are increasingly problematized. In other words, instead of seeing it only as the work of the devil, vampirism can be explained in different manners – as a representation of the human condition, for example, rather than as a metaphysical conflict between good and evil (Punter 2004: 268-272).

Thus, what has always been considered indivisible, the individual, becomes, above all, fragmented. That fragmentation is celebrated through the figure of the vampire in the literary narratives of the XIX and XX centuries, hence the multiple identities of that tormented shadow. This tormented manner of being is the foundation of the permanent state of war typical of the constant tension between the way a person is and the way he/she would wish to be. The figure of the vampire subverts what Michel Maffesoli calls "the phantom of the self", common in the Western tradition. To the French philosopher, dogmatic reason not only can but also needs to impose a unity. Feelings and affections, however, in their turn, drive us into a turbulence, a discomfort of multiplicity. Thus, the genealogy of the rebellious spirit presents us with a revolt against the conceptions of the individual as static. It is exactly the fact of being multiple in himself/herself that brings the individual to the lack of recognition of himself/herself in the conventional constructs of social rigidity¹ (Maffesoli 2002: 115).

It is common knowledge that the vampire does not die, or better, it is the undead. Perhaps it would be interesting to try to understand the vampire as a centrifugal force that escapes any limiting connection, and therefore is bound to new significations conveyed by the social, historical and political contexts of which it is a part. Thus, this figure emerges at times of conflicts and tensions. The undead reflects, metaphorically, that which is always on the verge of exploding, of appearing; it threatens the return of the outlaw that characterizes the spirit of the time. The vampires are, therefore, shadows that give meaning to life, conferring a sweet-sour flavour to it. This ambivalence of the vampire signals the organicity of all things. Its double life is full of practices of transgressions, of animality, incarnating that which the enlightenment tries to erase, to throw to the margins. Thus the vampire is a metaphor of the completely Other that is more likely to offer a "site of identification than a metaphor for what must be abjected" (Punter 2004: 271).

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converge as they both reveal the sombre side of our nature which, according to Maffesoli, though it can be domesticated by culture, continues to enliven our desires, our fears, and our feelings. Freud, Kristeva, Beauvoir and Foucault will help in the development of the ideas of the uncanny, abjection, identity, and sexuality.

The erotic body

Gothic literature, through mechanisms that subvert traditional notions of the real, brings to light that which was hidden so as not to disturb the proper function of the social machine. Hence the Gothic occupies an interstitial space, away from the center, always at the edge. The uncanny region is the space of concealed desire which, according to Freud (1963), is familiar and old – established in the mind and become alienated from it only through the process of repression.

In my readings of the Brazilian author, Heloísa Seixas, and the Irish one, Bram Stoker, I observe the great force of the erotic power that the vampire exerts on women. This desire is in consonance with one of the veins that make the heart of the Gothic beat, namely, taboo. The use of this device has become a consensus with the writers of the genre to give visibility to matters that are normally discarded in order to keep the social and psychological balance of the individual. As we all know, a taboo is one of the most extreme forms of inhibition imposed by a culture to guarantee its survival. However, its violation is manifested in the Gothic genre through narratives of phantasy, displaying ghosts and vampires, where the forbidden is substituted by something that fills the libidinal gap. As the locus of absolute desire, the libido seeks absolute satisfaction, refusing to acknowledge ‘realistic’ restraints (Jackson 2000: 70).

So as to suffocate this manifestation of desire, the vampire was created in the XIX century, a machine that fabricated “a proliferation of discourses, carefully tailored to the requirements of power” (Foucault 1998: 72). Nevertheless, this device was not sufficient, as Foucault observes, for these discourses, although used as deployments of power and knowledge, only intensified pleasures. According to Foucault, at issue is not a movement bent on pushing rude sex back into some obscure and inaccessible region, but on the contrary, a process that spreads it over the surface of things and bodies.

In “Íblis”, by Heloísa Seixas, the inclusion of mystery, the uncanny, is not shown abruptly; on the contrary, as Tavares says in the introduction it slowly appears, “in a gradual dislocation from the axis of perception, impelling the narrative voice, character and reader, each page, a little bit further from the prescribed reality”² (Seixas 2003: 116). Already in the first scene of the narrative, the narrator induces the reader to deviate from her/his traditional position to deal with the real, when he compares the sweet smell of mud that penetrates in Camila’s [the protagonist] nostrils with “the bittersweet scent of the withered flowers of dead bodies”³ (Seixas 117).

The story takes place in Istanbul, where Camila goes to supervise the restoration work of the tiles of the Blue Mosque, and on the train, on her way to Paris, where she

lives. However, before catching the train, Camila stops “with her hands on the cold stone of the windowsill, to admire the blue, almost black, of the waters of the Bosforo, reflecting in its nervous mirror the mishaped domes [...] of the old walls that one day protected the city” (Seixas 117). This scene builds up an atmosphere for the coming of Íblis Vardanián, when the presence of the vampire is consolidated, and the reader makes the inevitable comparison with *Dracula*, by Bram Stoker.

Before Camila boards the train, she sits on a bench in a park, determined to read a book on Islamism; instead she contemplates the book front cover with “a man with a thick black beard, a white turban, a dark cloak over grey clothes, and a machine-gun in his hands” (Seixas 118). Islamism fascinated Camila: “everything she did up to the moment had gravitated around that fascination” (ibid. 118). Unfortunately, she had to put the book aside to catch the train to Paris.

We can observe that in both narratives under discussion the train is used as a means of transportation. In *Dracula*, Harker, a solicitor’s clerk from London, travels towards Transylvania and Dracula’s castle, and in *Íblis*, Camila travels home. It is important to notice here that the suspense of both narratives depends upon keeping the characters in ignorance of what they are about to encounter – like most vampire fiction, this device works by systematically delaying the acquisition of knowledge. At the same time, the train is important for it provides them with a panoramic perception: “what one sees is panoramic, spectacular, distanced and soon left behind” (Gelder 1994: 3). We can also observe that those dislocations from one place to another signal transitions, such as a transition from life to the un-death, like the awakening to a transgressive sexuality, or the perception that the way to fulfill one’s desire rests on the negation of sexual patterns that have been socially prescribed.

Before entering the train, Camila feels the gaze of a man standing at the platform. Notwithstanding the ironic tone of narrative distancing, the narrator’s description of the male figure forces the reader to make an association with Count Dracula. The stranger has a strong aquiline face and his eagle eyes seemed to want to tear her apart as if they were daggers. His black beard grows profusely around the face, while the nose, arched and blazing, protudes aggressively (Seixas 120). The Count, in his turn, has a face “strong – a very strong – aquiline, with high bridge of the thin nose and peculiarly arched nostrils [...], his hair growing scantily round the temples, but profusely elsewhere [...]. His eyes blazed with a sort of demoniac fury” (Stoker 1996: 17, 26).

Abjected body

The vampire in these narratives is nothing but the unconscious projection of desire. For projection, we must understand those feelings “which the subject refuses to recognize or rejects in himself and which are expelled from the self and located in another person or thing” (Jackson 66). Thus, the vampire, as other, is a reflection of the self that makes itself present, just as repressed memories of desire: the knowledge that

must be denied, forbidden. Consequently, the myth of the vampire is, perhaps, the highest symbolic representation of eroticism. Its return in Victorian England, after its appearance in legends and its incursions in Polidori's *The Vampyre*, and many other works of fiction, proves that it is a myth born out of extreme repression. The figure of the vampire brings to light all that is kept in the dark, hence his appearance at night, in the train (as in *Íblis*), "when light/vision/the power of the look are suspended" (Jackson 120).

When desire is accomplished, as in Lucy's case, death usually follows it. As Foucault observes, "strange pleasures brought an equal measure of condemnation" (Foucault 1998: 38). In "*Íblis*", on the other hand, we see that pleasure is welcomed. In both narratives, nevertheless, sexual desire is gradually constructed, which, paradoxically, shows that the most important element to permeate the object of desire is fear. Hence the vampire is desired with attraction and repulsion.

Contrary to the object (that which opposes the subject), the abject is excluded from the realm of meaning, for it cannot be named. Yet, from its place of banishment, the abject is always challenging the subject, refusing to be expelled. Consequently, it is a threat: it provokes the return of the repressed, of that which, though familiar, must be kept at the edge, for it does not respect ideology. Thus, the abject is on the other side of the border, does not respect positions, rules; on the contrary, it draws attention to the fragility of the law. On the other hand, abjection is linked to desire. This process, however, is unconscious, so much so that it is rejected by the subject. This paradox marks its association with the literary Gothic. So, if on the one hand the abject is rejected, on the other, it is violently and painfully desired. And as in *jouissance*, the object of desire "bursts with the shattered mirror where the ego gives up its image in order to contemplate itself in the Other" (Kristeva 1982: 9).

Abjection is above all ambiguity. If on the one hand it releases a hold, on the other it does not allow the other to be free from what threatens it. On the contrary, abjection acknowledges it to be in perpetual danger. Hence pleasure and repulsion. The abject is not identified only with a past repression, but with what constitutes the subject, his/her desires, which, although repressed by laws, social norms, and structures of meanings, are there to be sued for. According to Kristeva, "I experience abjection only if an Other has settled in place and instead of what will be 'me'. Not at all an other with whom I identify and incorporate, but an Other who precedes and possesses me, and through such possession causes me to be" (Kristeva 10). It is important to emphasize that it is through abjection, as represented in literary works, that social and moral values can be questioned. At the same time, the abjected body retains the power to revolt and transgress.

Still in the same line of thought, we see that it is the double of me that is in the game, yearning for infinitude, trying to find, live something else apart from what is ascribed to my social identity. This duality is a basic element in the vampire narratives, which not only recognize but also act the obscure side of the self, not limiting itself to a unilateral rational ideal (Maffesoli 118). Maffesoli calls our attention to this inconstancy between divine and profane values that are related in all human histories. This bipolarity

has been kept in the collective memory through the vampire, a figure that encompasses “a sheer conservatory of concrete wisdom, in which the homology between ‘what is underneath’ and ‘what is above’ used to be a lived reality” (ibid. 119).

Final comments

There is a crucial difference between Seixas’ and Stoker’s narratives. In the former, the reader has access to the protagonist’s desire through parallel and underlined stories, while in the latter, desire is instigated only when confronted with abjection. In “Íblis”, Camila, though scared, does not resist the aggressive gaze of the man she identifies with the Muslim fighter of the front cover of the book. She is dominated by fear and attraction. It is important to notice that in both works under consideration, the vampire figure functions as a propelling element of the characters’ latent desires, which is awoken by the disturbing effect of the gaze.

Thus, Camila, just by the simple presence of the stranger in the train, “feels a warmth in the nape”. As she moves around she sees him. She tries to control herself, but the piercing eyes “undressed her”(Seixas 121) to such an extent that she brings to mind past sexual fancies. In *Dracula*, in its turn, Harker is visited by female vampires with “great dark, piercing eyes” (Stoker 37). Harker felt he recognized the face of one of them, the one with golden hair and eyes of pale sapphires, as if this recognition had been connected with a “dreamy fear” (ibid. 37) whose origin he could not recollect then: “There was something about them that made me uneasy, some longing and at the same time some deadly fear. I felt in my heart a wicked, burning desire that they would kiss me with those red lips” (ibid. 37).

Camila finds out that the name of the man that fascinated her is Íblis Vardanián, and that, as *Dracula*, he dresses himself in black when he comes to see her in her cabin in the train: “She knows she is lost, his eyes assure her of this” (Seixas 123). There are other moments in “Íblis” when the reader is reminded of Stoker’s novel. The first one concerns the names of the vampires. Camila also finds out that Íblis in Muslim literature means “morning star”, “the link between light, and darkness, symbol of ... Lucifer! Lucifer, the fallen angel, the devil between dark and light” (ibid. 123). This is the definition of the vampire. The second moment concerns the sexual act. In “Íblis”, the hands of the figure of darkness touch her breasts and “move up, with a delicate touch, in the direction of the neck” (ibid. 123); in *Dracula*, in its turn, “his right hand gripped her [Mina] by the back of the neck, forcing her face down on his bosom” (Stoker 282).

The figure of the vampire can tell us about sexuality, of course; but it can also be associated with more specific contemporary concerns, such as relations of power and alienation, attitudes towards evil at the end of an unprecedentedly secular century.

To conclude, we could say that the figure of the vampire has, throughout history, and in different cultures, the power to be outside human categorization, which facilitates its appropriation by Gothic writers to reflect the changes of time in the human mind and

soul. In both narratives, notwithstanding the chronological distance that separates them, we notice that the vampire is more of a symptom than of a cause, a symptom of desires which, powerfully repressed, can only emerge in unusual free spaces, such as the one constituted by literary production.

Notes

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1 All quotations from Maffesoli's work are translated by me.

2 My translation.

3 All quotations from Íblis are translated by me.

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