

Preface

Virtually any of the thousands of students who have taken Jan Perkowski's courses on Slavic vampirism can tell you what an *òppi* is. Many others, however, unfortunate enough never to have studied in Austin or Charlottesville, remain unfamiliar with this odd variant of the word for 'vampire' among the Kashubs living in Ontario. An authentic extant Slavic folk belief in vampires was discovered in the New World almost by accident when Perkowski was doing sociolinguistic fieldwork for the Canadian government in the late Sixties. Were it not for that serendipitous happenstance, and Perkowski's assiduous and prodigious follow-up research into Slavic vampire folklore over the next several decades, we might all believe that vampires come from Romania and that Vlad Dracula was a vampire.

To fight such prevailing popular beliefs has been an uphill struggle, I imagine: many of those eager sophomores who sign up year after year for his "*Dracula* class" do so on the basis of expectations set by the media industries of Hollywood, Rome and London, as well as by their classes in nineteenth-century and Gothic literature, not to mention, in recent decades, the Gothic subculture itself and now the *Buffy* industry. While students today may have no idea who Bela Lugosi was, the iconography of the vampire in American and Western European culture is still predominant enough to spawn the metaphors which Nina Auerbach tells us are closely attached to our political arguments. Yet no one out there who is engaged in either propagating or cashing in on those metaphors seems to find it necessary to acknowledge that the Slavic folkloric vampire, on which *Dracula* was demonstrably based, represents an aspect of the vampire's social history that is *sine qua non* for understanding the vampire at a level that transcends the tendentious.

So Perkowski begins this book with essentially the same tales as those he has used to introduce his renowned class on vampires: the folk beliefs he encountered among the Ontario Kashubs, who had emigrated to Canada from a West Slavic region in what is now Poland. What is remarkable about these narratives is not so much that "Old World" beliefs should be extant so late into the twentieth century—plenty of traditional oral folklore still survives in various ethnic pockets all over North America—but rather the utter casualness

with which, for example, one of Perkowski's informants tells the investigator that *he* is a vampire.

Perhaps it was this near indifference to the vampire, accompanied by no cynicism or facetiousness and in fact apparently completely unaffected by conceptions gleaned from *Dracula*, that drew me so deeply into this topic after first reading Perkowski's early work some thirty years ago. For the off-handed and deadpan response of a Canadian immigrant in fact reveals something incredibly profound, namely that in the folklore of the Slavs, the vampire has a limited place, he plays a specific yet in some ways unremarkable role in a broader system of folk belief. Where in the West, the vampire is utterly monstrous, the symbol of pure evil and darkness that is nevertheless romanticized and eroticized, his moral status is more nuanced and ambiguous in the Slavic conception. And yet, clearly, the ancient Slavic folkloric vampire represents the historical basis of the pop cultural vampire about which movies, television shows, and video games are still being profitably made. What, then, is the morphology of this demon, that he can be regarded so differently by two cultures that otherwise were not so different?

Perhaps it was the wisdom of innocence that kept Perkowski from attempting to answer that question in the first work to be included in the present collection. As a long-time student of this disciple of Roman Jakobson, it has been very instructive for me to go back to the very beginning of Perkowski's *œuvre vampirique* and work through his research and collecting in a more or less chronological fashion. For while many scholars outside of Slavistics now acknowledge the Slavic roots of vampirism, when the work on Kashubs was first published, and even when the second book collected here, *Vampires of the Slavs*, was printed (1976), there was almost no available literature on the vampire that located this mythology within its proper Slavic boundaries. True, writing on the folkloric vampire has been available in English or other European languages since the botanist de Tournefort traveled in the Levant in the late seventeenth century. But he and other Enlightenment investigators by and large had little direct understanding of the South Slavic world, in part because the region had so long been dominated by the Ottoman Turks. So an American Slavic scholar, finding "real" vampires right on America's doorstep, takes the next logical step and presents for an American audience a valuable collection of early, generally unavailable writings on the East European Slavic vampire, in some cases translating these once-obscure works himself.

As Perkowski tells us in his preface to *Vampires*, one of the motives for doing so was that he found himself teaching a course at University of Texas on vampires which brought in over six hundred students. The unexpected popularity of the course demanded a textbook, or at least a source book. Since

there were none on this subject, Perkowski himself gathered several valuable articles on folkloric vampires, ranging from philosophical (Calmet) to theosophical (A. Osborne Eaves), from folkloristic (Afanas'ev) to literary (A. Tolstoy) and beyond. While the organizational principles behind the arrangement of the selections in *Vampires of the Slavs* may not always be clear, the separate works themselves provide an enormous amount of data which represent a wide array of views of the vampire, from the vampire's place in Slavic mythology to overviews of South Slavic vampire folklore and literary vampire tales from Russia, Ukraine and Serbia.

Some of the materials here are enormously useful, not necessarily for their accuracy or the depth of their insight into the meaning (if that term has not become too quaint) of the vampire, but because they reveal historical stages in the conception of the vampire that are quite different from what most would know about the vampire who are familiar only with the Western literary tradition. This corrective aspect of Perkowski's *Vampires*, which exposes a tradition directly linked to Balkan or at any rate Slavic folklore that follows a path that is quite independent of the nineteenth-century literary/metaphoric notions of the vampire, has had a difficult time getting traction in popular consciousness in the West, which suggests an entrenchment of the Romantic and Gothic traditions, and a concomitant resistance to correction by legitimate ethnographic research, that is interesting in itself. This resistance, I would suggest, is part of the very mechanism by which the vampire adapts and survives from culture to culture.

The difference between the literary and folkloric vampire, which Perkowski delineates quite thoroughly in the third book included here, *The Darkling: A Treatise on Slavic Vampirism*, cannot, as it turns out, be reduced simply to the differences in the defining superficial characteristics of the vampire motif within these two distinct, but interconnected, traditions. As I suggested above, the significance of the vampire within the two systems is vastly different: in the literary/cinematic tradition, perhaps beginning with Marx's famous comment about the vampire nature of capitalism, the vampire stands apart from any fixed religious or cultural system but clearly embodies a class hierarchy, whereas in the folkloric tradition, the vampire is closely connected to a broad, primarily agrarian, system of beliefs regarding man's place in nature, and the role of death, the after-life and religion within the non-urbanized community. Without the availability of the details presented here, students of the vampire with no acquaintance with Slavic languages would have virtually no way to understand the evolution of this other, original vampire, and thus to understand what was lost—or perhaps more accurately,

occluded—by the absorption of the vampire mytheme into Western consciousness.

It becomes clear, reading these pages, that the Western understanding of the Balkan vampire encodes a Western European perception of the Balkans (and other Slavic regions) in general. It also becomes clear that this perception has been vaguely distorted at best and hopelessly naïve at its worst—a problem that seems to result primarily from the several polarities that aligned themselves historically and geographically along the historical fault line between a primarily Roman Catholic and Protestant culture on one hand and a mixed Orthodox and Islamic group on the other. It is thus all the more important that we have a true Slavist to help disentangle for us Western fantasies about Eastern Europe from the actual cultural and anthropological history of the region.

It is nevertheless true that the Slavic Balkans has had a very complex history of ethnic interaction, commerce, religion and politics. As a result, the concept of the vampire, like many other terms and beliefs, has undergone great modification as it has come into contact with competing belief and ritual systems. Thanks to Perkowski's understanding of language contact and migration, and his consequent unwillingness to simplify the matter for us and view the vampire as a single, homogenous demonic entity, the true complexity of this folklore and its ineffability can be discerned within the enormous amount of confusing, and sometimes contradictory, data regarding vampires and related folkloric characters. In *The Darkling*, he brings his linguist's need for taxonomy to the study of vampire narrative, in order to clarify the turbid picture that has arisen from what he calls "daemon contamination."

Useful as such a structure might be for ethnographers attempting to correlate a large corpus of vampire narratives, the non-linguist will probably find some of Perkowski's interpretations (there is a slot in his taxonomic table, which he calls an "analysis outline," for expressing the "social/psychological role" of the vampire within a given context) unmotivated. Recalling, however, that in 1989 the Slavic folkloric vampire was barely acknowledged outside of Europe, much less culturally interpreted, the very idea that the vampire had a shifting, functional role was important to put forth.

The final section of this book contains Jan Perkowski's previously uncollected articles on vampire lore, whose real value is to update us on the fate of the folkloric vampire even into the current century. Perkowski is the first, to my knowledge, to show how the place of the vampire in the Balkans (primarily Bulgaria) has been affected by Turkish cultural influence, and to demonstrate the relationship between local rituals and beliefs and the shape of the vampire (see, for example, his essay on the legend of Demir Baba, the Iron

Father). While vampire folklore does seem to be dying out in Eastern Europe as the inexorable processes of urbanization and, now, globalization disturb the more traditional structures of the agrarian village (which is the natural context for vampire lore), Perkowski reminds us that there is still much to learn not only from examining the last vestiges of the oral folkloric tradition, but also from following what happens to this indigenous demon as his reanimated replicant, the Western literary and cinematic vampire, moves into his own homeland and bites him on the neck.

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