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‘Numinous’ and ‘Negatively Numinous’ in Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*

Lucy Linforth: The University of Edinburgh

Within the very first few lines of John Milton’s epic poem, *Paradise Lost*, a vivid and violent account is given depicting the momentous division of heaven, in which

Him the Almighty Power
Hurl’d headlong flaming from th’ethereal sky
With hideous ruin and combustion down
To bottomless perdition, there to dwell
In adamant chains and penal fire,
Who durst defy th’Omnipotent to arms (Lines 45-49).

Lucifer, Heaven’s own “lost Archangel” is the culprit of this repugnant act of presumption, and thus is cast to the depths of hell to be separate from those privileges he previously enjoyed (Line 243). In Milton’s epic poem Lucifer, the figure that many cultures readily identify as the very antithesis of Godliness, is constructed as a creature created by God’s own hand, nurtured by God’s own systems and guilty of aspiring to God’s station, and “trusted to have equalled the Most High” (Line 40). Although there is no direct account in the Bible of the fall from heaven, there are several references to be found in accordance with Milton’s assertion, such as 1 Timothy 3:6: “He must be mature in the faith, so that he will not swell up with pride and be condemned, as the Devil was”; similarly in Isaiah 14:12-14, a condemnation and fall is directly stated:

King of Babylonia, bright morning star, you have fallen from heaven! In the past you have conquered nations, but now you have been thrown to the ground. You were determined to climb up to heaven and to place your throne above the highest stars. You thought that you would sit like a king

on that mountain in the north where the gods assemble. You said you would climb to the tops of the clouds and be like the Almighty.

Yet through this dramatic exploration of the schism of the sacred and sacrilegious, Milton's work not only explicitly sanctions the Devil with heavenly genesis and burdens the heavens with an irreverent offspring: this work also provides a biblical foundation and literary incarnation of the "negatively numinous", as developed by the eminent theologian Rudolf Otto (134). In his work *The Idea of the Holy*, Otto sought to separate the concept of "the holy" from moral and rational attributes, and to isolate and explore the "unnamed Something" of religious experience, to which he would attribute the name of the "numinous" (6, 7). In Otto's theory the experience of the "numinous", although derived from the Latin "numen" meaning "revealing or indicating the presence of a divinity", incorporates within this religious experience feelings of terror and awe ("Numen". Oxford English Dictionary Online. 2012.). Indeed, Otto asserted that the numinous may be experienced in "wild and demonic forms", even "grisly horror and shuddering": in this theory the holy, it would appear, partakes of the terrifying and even demonic (13). Yet, although even the numinous appears to partake in a Gothicised religious experience, according to Otto it is when this element of fear is "cut loose from other elements and intensified into *mysterium horrendum*" that the "negatively numinous" occurs (134). It is neither completely separate from the divine, nor completely a part of the holy: rather, one may turn to Otto's articulation for elucidation upon this matter, in his assertion that "in all religions, 'the devilish' plays its part and has its place as that which, opposed to the divine, has yet something in common with it" (134). This paper seeks to explore the representation of both the numinous and negatively numinous presence in a late nineteenth century Gothic novel which occupies the complicated borderland between the supposed binary oppositions of the sacred and sacrilegious, holy and profane, of good and evil: Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897).

Stoker's novel is undoubtedly famed for the demonic and depraved, perverse and profane activities of the figure of the Count: yet, as critic Maud Ellmann has asserted, "the novel, for all its popularity, has received little attention in its own right" ('Introduction', *Dracula*, vii). Therefore, to many whose acquaintance with the vampire originates in popular cultural constructions of Dracula as the embodiment of the Anti-Christ, the purpose of this study may seem rather anomalous; in that it seeks to evidence a vital presence of religion, which permeates the entirety of this novel, and directly motivates the actions of the novel's protagonist. This revelation may seem less surprising, however, when one considers the prevalence of religion throughout the literary corpus produced in the nineteenth century, owing in part to the complex and shifting nature of religion at the time. The mid-Victorian period saw the separation of the Church of England into the three major factions; Evangelical, Broad Church and High Church (although, this is by no means an exhaustive list- within these three divisions there were the many more factions, including the Nonconformists- Baptists, Methodists, Congregationalists; and within the High Church the 'Oxford Movement' and 'Tractarianism'). As well as conflicting opinion and challenges within the Church, there were several significant outside challenges to religion including Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill's theories of Utilitarianism, and the scientific theories of Thomas Henry Huxley and Charles Darwin, most notably in the theories of Evolution. These increasing challenges engendered an anxiety concerning religion, and accordingly the literature of the period seemed to voice a growing criticism and even doubt of institutionalised religion. Whilst many writers used this voice to expose the fraudulence of institution, such as may be read in the novels of Charles Dickens, where religious demeanour disguises moral ambiguity, and social benefaction neglects genuine aid; many other authors articulated a personal and societal struggle with an increasingly alienated deity, as scholar J. Hillis Miller's explores in his work *The Disappearance of God: Five Nineteenth Century Writers*. This increasing tumult reached its crisis at the end of the nineteenth

century, when it firmly collided with the *fin de siècle* tenor of loss and melancholy, and the sense of spiritual desolation which this inspired would be further explored by writers of the early modernist genre. Yet the focus of this study concerns one reaction to this sense of loss: a terrifying notion of appropriation. The position a Christian God had once occupied was vacant, and in his place, a series of literary avatars were created by the authors of this period. From the scientific monsters such as Edward Hyde, Doctor Moreau, and Helen Vaughan; to the slouching, rough beast of William Butler Yeats' ominous poem 'The Second Coming' (1919): no figure more closely resembles or violently repels the divine than Stoker's archangel of Gothic literature, Count Dracula.

It has been identified that "*Dracula* more clearly than other Gothic works of fiction dramatises the cosmic struggle between the opposing forces of darkness and light, of the sacred and the profane" (Varnado, 97-98). Indeed in the course of Stoker's novel the darker powers of the Count are eventually overcome by Western forces acting on the side of what is good and sacred, yet what is particularly surprising in Stoker's novel is that this "cosmic struggle" is by no means a clear battle fought by two opposing sides. Stoker's text internalises and investigates moral ambiguity of many of his characters, rendering notions of "darkness and light" as subsequently distorted. The forces of "light" in this novel are by no means universally depicted in a beneficial manner, and do not impart a distinct representation of that which is "sacred". It is therefore worth briefly focusing attention upon this apparently "good" band of men who seek to destroy the Count. Stoker assembles this exemplary group in order to eradicate the threat posed by the vampire: a group whose merits are insinuated merely through their respective titles and qualifications. Professor Van Helsing, Doctor John Seward, solicitor Jonathan Harker and Arthur Holmwood (later Lord Godalming), are undoubtedly Stoker's heroes of the novel. Yet in an extremely memorable passage of the novel, the act these men undertake "in God's name, that so all may be well with the dead that we love, and that the Un-Dead pass away" in fact takes the form of an act of grotesque and excessive Gothic violence

(216). It is the destruction of the “Thing” that Lucy Westenra has become subsequent to her encounter with Dracula which allows the reader to see this militia of men in a morally ambiguous light (216). In completing this mission, they carry out a brutal elimination and subsequent mutilation of Lucy’s corpse in a scene which comprises arguably one of the most horrific extracts in Gothic literature (216). Several critics have acknowledged this scene to be one of unprecedented violence: it has been likened to a depiction of gang rape, and also as an assertion of “phallic manliness and... national identity” (Ellmann, 56). In order to save Lucy’s soul, the men must dispose of Lucy’s vampire form; the only cessation of which is a stake through the heart followed by decapitation, the removal of her heart and the arrangement of preventative deposits of garlic. Yet, as previously implied this scene of professed liberation takes the form of a Gothicised, culminating scene of vile horror; a scene of excessive violence attended by an obligatory yet unenthusiastic missal presiding over an act of obscene profanity towards the dead.

Thus in a novel where there is no distinct clarity bestowed upon the forces of good and evil, it is perhaps less surprising that evidence of both the sacred and the profane emanate equally from the figure of the Count himself. Although we know his actions to be abhorrent and inhuman: as scholar S. L. Varnado vitally acknowledges “the mysterious laws that govern his activities are related to the divine” (102). In observing the patterns of Dracula’s actions, it is clearly through ritual and structure of organised religion that he is able to control his sacrilegious empire: and this association necessarily indicates his numinous quality, moving entirely within the sphere of the “holy”. To begin to explain this contradiction, throughout the novel Dracula’s actions may ostensibly find explanation and origin within the framework of Christian ceremony and practice. Indeed, it would appear that the Count consistently endeavours to operate through the structures of religion, even in the most practical of matters. Therefore, he arranges or enforces meetings with his disciples; the life-eating lunatic Renfield and the beautiful yet latently lascivious Lucy Westenra, within the sacred grounds of a Church and a graveyard; both of which lie

conveniently empty of an evening thus are easily appropriated for sacrilegious use. Further still, it is in the manner of a spiritual conversion that Renfield and Lucy succumb to the power of the Count, as it is only after attending several church meetings that Lucy is eventually penetrated by Dracula's power, and fully subservient to the vampire. Similarly, it is once Dracula has made it clear to Renfield the extent of "life" that he can offer this unstable mind that the man fully succumbs, and worships Dracula in an unmistakably reverential manner as his "Lord and Master": certainly it appears that Renfield feels the awe and terror of Dracula as a numinous presence (156). However, after their conversions take place, Dracula's subsequent visitations to Renfield and Lucy have all the qualities of uncontrollable religious apparitions, occurring to the individual mostly at night or whilst they are in a dreamlike state. Therefore, through mannerisms and methods similar to those of religious conversion, Dracula strives to gather disciples to his unholy congregation, and endeavours through the same powerful and sacred mechanisms to maintain their loyalty.

Yet it is once the Count has recruited the faithful to his foul ranks that the ultimate parody may begin. From this most Un-Holy of all Gothic monsters, one receives a horridly perfect parody of Christian practice: an inversion of the ritual which takes the central focus of Christian worship. As David Punter asserts, the structure of Dracula's Gothic empire and the ritual to which it adheres is essentially an "inversion of Christianity and particularly of Pauline Christianity in that Dracula promises and gives the real resurrection of the body, but disunited from the soul" (261). Although there are multiple beliefs within the various denominations of Christianity concerning the events of the Eucharist, including the Protestant belief in the Eucharist as an act of symbolism and remembrance, it is clear that Dracula's actions vitally mirror the Roman Catholic belief in Transubstantiation, being a belief in a literal act through which "the conversion in the Eucharist of the whole substance of the bread into the body and of the wine into the blood of Christ, only the appearances (and other 'accidents') of bread and wine

remaining” (“Transubstantiation”. Oxford English Dictionary Online. 2012.). It is through this act of fleshly consumption that Dracula and his followers adhere to and imitate the Christian notion of the Eucharist, in a “malign parody of the sacred” (Varnado, 109). The act here becomes a “parody of the sacred” as in Dracula’s Eucharistic practice the freely sacrificial body and blood of Christ are replaced by the body and blood of abducted innocents: and in this replacement, an act which in Christian practice holds vital, liberating significance becomes a horrendous, negatively numinous act of a profane deity.

This gruesome substitution aside, the motives behind the act may once again find basis in a Christian incarnation. Christ’s words in the Last Supper provide a point of departure from which Dracula’s irreligious sacrament is contorted: “‘Take, eat; this is my body.’ Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, saying, ‘Drink from it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.’” (Matthew 26: 26-28). Similarly, by draining the blood of his congregation Dracula shares his unholy word and unclean practice to his disciples who will further disseminate his bad blood and perverse word in imitation of him. In undertaking this act the Count professes, in startlingly similar words to the biblical manifestation of the first Eucharist as accredited to Christ, that his victims will become “flesh of my flesh; blood of my blood; kin of my kin” (Stoker, 288). Just as the faithful congregation of a Christian Mass would expect, figuratively or literally, to consume the body and blood of Christ and thus attain the salvation of eternal life; so too do the followers of Dracula expect to prolong their existence, through the act of drinking the blood of the living. Indeed, this notion of the physically empowering and restorative property of blood is a theme which appears frequently throughout Gothic literature, perhaps the most clear example being in H.G. Wells’ *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, (1896): shipwrecked and close to death, Edward Prendick is given a drink which “tasted like blood” by Doctor Moreau’s disciple Montgomery, which serves to revitalize and save him

(9). As the novel reveals Moreau's malevolent medical practices on the island, the evidence is strong in supposing that this drink was indeed blood. Therefore, in both Wells' and Stoker's novels, the significance of blood may be synopsised by Renfield's frequent mantra of "the blood is the life"; a phrase which is imitative of the promise bequeathed by the Christian act of the Eucharist, and directly related to the Old Testament words of the Lord in Leviticus 17: 10-11, "For the life of the flesh is in the blood" (Stoker, 234).

However, the true inversion of this religious desire for eternal life lies in the fact that the act in the Christian faith symbolises the ultimate redemption and liberation of the individual: yet, in the hands of this Gothic monster, eternal life becomes an imprisonment. The moral and holy are here 'cut loose', and all that remains is the shuddering horror of tyranny and a living death (Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, 134). Dracula creates a ritualistic and hierarchical society in which he and his un-dead disciples, trapped within a sordid and immoral living death may continue their bodily contamination amongst the population, encouraging imitation of this perverse Eucharist in order to ever increase their unholy congregation. Rather than converting of their own free will, his followers and victims are deceived or forced into practicing an empty ritual: they drain the life blood from other victims. There is no promised redemption; no reward; but a series of gluttonous attacks to ward off an eternal hunger for something out of reach. The blood that he disseminates in this irreligious ritual is stagnant and useless, and only serves to further spread his own degeneracy. Indeed, the dispersal of 'blood' has wider connotations than the religious; Dracula's actions are connected to the contemporary fears of the venereal disease that was rapidly spreading across Victorian England¹. For example, Mina is forced to drink blood from an open vein in Dracula's chest, and Lucy is subjected to nightly visits from the Count. As a sexual assault and as an eternal and unforgiving imprisonment, the Eucharistic and redemptive properties of the blood necessary for Christian worship are further perverted. Dracula takes the skeleton of ritual, and stretches it to morbid excess.

It is precisely this ostentatious ceremony and ritualistic exterior, so perfectly maintained and yet horribly inverted which illuminates the simultaneity of that which is sacred and sacrilegious, the “negative numinous” radiating from the figure of Dracula. Indeed, throughout the Gothic literature of the late nineteenth century, in each profane incarnation and inversion of the sacred, that which is lost and that which appropriates this loss are revealed in a halo of awful light. In Stoker’s Gothic tale, religion is both startlingly present and terrifyingly absent: Godly absence is manifest throughout Stoker’s text in the sheer religiosity of Dracula’s action. Indeed, possibly the most horrible inversion of all and the clearest instance of this negative numinous lies in the fact that Dracula replaces God as a clearly degenerate deity, and disseminates his degenerate word throughout the land. Victorian readers would have certainly associated the Count with the contemporary fears of degeneracy, as his physical descriptions throughout the text certainly construct this reading. Mina Harker asserts that Dracula is “a criminal and of a criminal type. Nordau and Lombroso would so classify him” (Stoker, 342). Further to this, upon his very first meeting with Dracula Jonathan Harker notes that he is of “a very marked physiognomy”:

His face was a strong- a very strong- aquiline, with high bridge of the thin nose and peculiarly arched nostrils; with lofty domed forehead, and hair growing scantily round the temples, but profusely elsewhere. His eyebrows were very massive, almost meeting over the nose...The mouth, so far as I could see it under the heavy moustache, was fixed and rather cruel-looking, with peculiarly sharp white teeth; these protruded over the lips, whose remarkable ruddiness showed astonishing vitality for a man of his years. For the rest, his ears were pale and at the tops extremely pointed... his hands...were rather coarse- broad, with squat fingers. Strange to say, there were hairs in the centre of the palm (17-18).

This description clearly moves within the contemporary notions of physiognomy, distinguishing the Count as identifiably associated with the description of the “criminal” in Lombrosian terms, by virtue of features such as the “ruddiness” of his lips, prominence of teeth and pointed earsⁱⁱ. The description also moves within the physiognomy of degeneracy as the creature described has many features including his teeth, “rank” breath and abundance of hair, as well as pronounced canine features which associate him with a carnivorous heritage related to the animal; this is the description of a creature departing from the human and returning to the beast (Stoker, 18).

Such a clear alignment with the figure of degeneracy, of a creature clearly “up from the Ape” sits rather confusedly with the construction of the Count as an anti-Christ, “down from the Angel”, as this essay has explored (Brian Aldiss, *Introduction, The Island of Doctor Moreau*, xxxi). Yet in a startlingly lucid manner, Dracula is equally constructed as both Ape and Angel; as many of the methods used to construct his degeneracy are also utilized to construct his demonic divinity. For example, Dracula’s human body is by no means secure or finite; he changes shape numerous times throughout the text, and several of these transformations are into bestial form. This fluidity of form and instability of the body would ordinarily align Dracula with the notion of a degenerate, or “abhuman subject... characterised by its morphic variability, continually in danger of becoming not-itself, becoming other” (Kelly Hurley, *The Gothic Body: Sexuality, Materialism, and Degeneration at the Fin de Siecle*, 3-4). Yet even these transformations are significant in Dracula’s affectation of divinity: his bestial and sub-human shapes may be read as degenerate forms of Christian iconography. Thus upon more than one occasion, Dracula appears as a bat hovering at Lucy Westenra’s window; a dark and nocturnal creature antithetical to the Christian belief of the transformation of the Holy Spirit to the form of a Dove, as in Matthew 3:16: “He saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him”. Similarly, Dracula is able to mysteriously pass through windows, passages and gaps which would be impossible for man to access;

he does so through the form of a 'mist' or vapour which takes the qualities of an obscuring and confusing power. Thus Mina Harker feels a sense of "lethargy" as "heavy, and dank, and cold" mists begin to thicken in her chamber (258). This is once again adversative to Biblical accounts of the Holy Spirit which also takes the form of a mist or wind, yet provides clarity and power as demonstrated in the following account of the Pentecost: "Suddenly there was a noise from the sky which sounded like a strong wind blowing, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. Then they saw what looked like tongues of fire which spread out and touched each person there. They were all filled up with the Holy Spirit and began to talk in other languages as the Spirit enabled them to speak" (Acts 2: 2-4). In direct contrast to this powerful and fortifying divine form, Dracula's negatively numinous forms disseminate confusion and imprisonment.

In a similar religious reading, literary scholar Stephen Arata approaches the physical constructions of the Count as a study in stigmata; a word in itself which has specifically religious connotations, and directly relates to the earlier idea of negative presence or numinous (21). In the Catholic faith, stigmata are the bodily marks of the crucifixion of Christ, and there are various recorded instances of followers of Christ bearing such marks, originating from St. Paul's final Letter to the Galatians: "The scars I have on my body show that I am the slave of Jesus" (6:17). Arata explains that there are particular physical stigmata associated with the Count, and their relation to those associated with religion: "like the marks left on the religious believer, degeneracy's stigmata were manifestations of an essence which was beyond human sense perception" (21). In a manner akin to that described in Catholic experience, after contact with the Count his victims adopt his stigmata and begin to transform into a similarly degenerate state. They are left with two white and red marks upon their throat, which do not heal; they are physically weakened and literally drained by the experience. However, once the transformation engendered by death takes place, the victim becomes a "carnal and unspiritual", consuming and criminal presence (214). Therefore Dracula's stigmata and

degeneracy are contagious, and responsible for the dispersal of both moral and spiritual disintegration. Dracula's bad blood and the subsequent stigmata move at an equally rapid pace to spread moral and sexual degeneracy, at once condemning the victim as being sexually implicit, voracious and sacrilegious being in their degenerative release. This inverted religious act breaks down those stable or repressive barriers made by religion, and releases the criminal, the sexual and the terrifying.

Thus in Stoker's novel, and also in the wider late nineteenth century gothic literary body, the sacrilegious frequently appears as a ghost of the sacred; the demonic as the lingering shadow of holiness, in a desperate struggle to compete with new and powerful forces of an increasingly modern and secular world. Yet these ghosts and shadows still evidently played a vital part in shaping new ideologies; indeed, as historian and anthropologist Mircea Eliade suggests, "to acquire a world of his own, he has been obliged to adopt the opposite of an earlier type of behaviour, and that behaviour is still emotionally present to him, in one form or another, ready to be re-actualised in his deepest being" (203-204). In this respect, the very best any impostor could attempt was "re-actualised" religion, rather than a thoroughly independent secular system. Thus in this manner every brutal ritual and demonic venture undertaken by the fiendish Dracula relates to and originates from the idea of the holy; and what this study has inadvertently evidenced is that through vile reflections and perverse parodies the most Gothicised and criticised, lamented loss and demented presence is in fact the sacred presence of the deity.

i For a full account of the significance of syphilitic readings in fin de siècle literature, see Andrew Smith, *Victorian Demons: Medicine, Masculinity and the Gothic at the Fin de Siècle* (pp. 95-117). In the frequent transmissions of blood which take place throughout the novel, several of these have connotations of a scene of sexual assault.

ii See 'The Born Criminal' for an in depth account of facial features of the criminal, including the ears, mouth and teeth, pp. 9-15. Gina Lombroso Ferrero. *Criminal Man: According to the Classification of Cesare Lombroso*. (London: G. P. Putnam's, 1911).

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