

CRIMSON CHRONICLES: PROBING ILLNESS AND POLITICS IN DAN SIMMONS' *CHILDREN OF THE NIGHT*

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Abstract: *Dan Simmons' Children of the Night (1992) weaves together medical research, vampire mythology, and political intrigue against the backdrop of post-Ceaușescu Romania, a country that has violently freed itself from decades of communist dictatorship. The narrative centres around Dr Kate Neuman, inadvertently drawn into a mystery involving numerous deaths affecting children in Romanian orphanages. She uncovers a blood disorder in one of the children whom she adopts, and her further investigations conducted in the US seemingly link his condition to the legend of vampires. Particularly noteworthy is the intermittent narrative presence of Dracula himself - a perennial figure in both Romanian and global political landscapes. As he engages in the process of re-memembering his past deeds, Dracula contemplates a long-awaited demise. This study, while recognizing the predominantly Gothic features of the narrative, posits its proximity to an illness narrative, akin to 'pathography' - an autobiographical account of illness, or memoirs by partners, children, or caregivers - an academic form that gained prominence during the AIDS crisis of the late 1980s and early 1990s (Luckhurst 2008:128). The analysis further contends that the personal vampiric tale, horrific in its essence, metaphorically signifies the bloodshed inherent in both historical and contemporary political struggles.*

Keywords: *Dracula, Gothic, horror, narrative medicine, politics, vampire*

1. Introduction

While early Gothic literature portrays victims suffering in isolated settings like castles perched on improbable slopes, in the nineteenth century the settings shift to urban environments and the narratives start to reflect anxieties about medicine and law, then emerging professions. Many classic Gothic tales revolve around the exploration of the ethical dangers of unleashed medical ambition; thus, clearly the connection between medicine and Gothic literature runs deep (Wasson 2015: 1). The focus on the body cements this connection and ensures its continuity to the present day. As Punter (1998: 9) claims, Gothic literature fundamentally identifies the vulnerability and fragility of the human body; consequently, medicine becomes a natural subject for Gothic exploration. For example, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* depicts the horrific costs of unrestricted scientific pursuit, while Robert Louis Stevenson's *Strange Case of Jekyll and Hyde* draws its substance from the investigation of the moral complexities of pharmaceutical self-testing (Wasson 2015). Furthermore, Gothic narratives are filled with metaphors of disease and contagion;

Mary Shelley's apocalyptic *The Last Man* (1826) builds on the devastating outcomes of a 21st century bubonic plague, as does Edgar Allan Poe's *The Masque of the Red Death* (1842) (Haffele-Thomas 2021: 265). Bram Stoker's mother's stories about the 1832 cholera outbreak in Sligo, which caused multiple premature burials of the sick, influenced his depiction of Count Dracula (Douglas 2013).

According to Stephanou (2014: 61) in the late 1980s and early 1990s, a notable association emerged between vampirism and AIDS in literature and film, exemplified by the publication of several vampire novels, such as Brian Aldiss' *Dracula Unbound*, Dan Simmons' *Children of the Night*, Patrick Whalen's *Night Thirst*, and Jewelle Gomez's *The Gilda Stories*, which specifically addressed AIDS, illness, and corrupted blood. These narratives depicted various aspects of the connection, including diseased vampires (*Dracula Unbound*), vampires consciously feeding on infected blood (*The Gilda Stories*), and even instances where vampires offered a supposed cure for AIDS (*Night Thirst*, *Children of the Night*). Cultural views on blood differ, stretching from Homer's Odysseus who revitalized the dead with blood (Homer 1945: Book 11, lines 136-162), while the Bible specifically prohibited the practice (Lev. 17: 11). More recently, scholars (R.P.P.W.M. Maas and P.J.G.M. Voets 2014: 945-946) argued that the features of vampirism closely resemble three rare medical conditions: porphyria, rabies, and pellagra. Drawing inspiration from this thematic intersection, my inquiry focuses on Dan Simmons' novel, where vampirism is portrayed as a manifestation of a medical condition. This will entail a dual examination: one that scrutinizes vampirism on its surface as a medical phenomenon and another that interprets it metaphorically as representative of the ailment afflicting the political body.

On this basis, this study will have two parts; the first part will dwell on the portrayal of the political 'sickness' of Romania, as seen through Western and Romanian eyes, in the first years after the collapse of Ceaușescu's regime. The second segment will focus on Dracula's narrative voice, which articulates a deeply personal and politically fraught historical backdrop. I will therefore frame the vampiric tale as belonging to a 'wounded storyteller' (Arthur W. Frank's (1995) concept), who needs to tell his story as he faces his much-awaited death. As such, I will explore the thematic phases of chaos, restitution, and quest of the wounded Dracula's story.

2.1. A survey of the image of Romania as Dracula's country

In fiction, as Crișan (2013: 60) elaborates, Romania's image abroad centered around the Dracula trope can be divided into two major categories. The first – and arguably still the most popular – is the sensationalist and stereotypical approach, represented by the spin-offs of Stoker's novel, while the second gives precedence to more nuanced and realistic portrayals of the country, challenging certain stereotypes in novels, travel memoirs and anthropological studies. The sensationalist mode became most obvious post-1989, with the association between Dracula and the executed Romanian dictator Nicolae Ceaușescu (shot on Christmas day); the bloodshed that preceded and followed it confirmed for many the savage, uncivilized and brutal nature of the country. According to Brînzeu (1997: 171) there were "rumours that

Ceaușescu asked for frequent transfusions of young blood to keep his body in good condition”; furthermore, “due to Ceaușescu, the two themes – that of the political tyrant, desirous to rule through terror, and that of the vampire sucking the blood and energy of his victims – have merged into the common topos of the vampire-dictator”. The Romanian historian Lucian Boia (2001: 10) claimed that although the country might have once displayed alluring exoticism - such as in the work of Paul Morand (and I might add Patrick Leigh Fermor (1977 and 2013)) – that was replaced by somber depictions, where Dracula’s legacy and Ceaușescu’s extravagant communism are prominent; thus, a mysterious revolution, devastating expeditions of miners in Bucharest, and troubling social issues like the indescribable plight of the abandoned children in the streets or those sick with AIDS, have further tarnished Romania’s image.

Most recently, journalist Paul Kenyon published his own *Children of the Night: The Strange and Epic Story of Modern Romania* (2022). All throughout his book, Paul Kenyon drew connections between major 20th century figures (such as King Carol II, Corneliu Zelea Codreanu, Ion Antonescu, Ana Pauker, Gheorghe Gheorghiu Dej) with dictatorial or criminal tendencies and Vlad the Impaler, so that they all appear to continue the latter’s legacy. In the book, the pervasive spectre of Vlad the Impaler, generally acknowledged as Dracula in Western discourse, casts an ominous shadow over the nation, and the ubiquitous blood imagery conveys a lingering presence that has helped perpetuate a debilitated and decaying body politic, rendering Romania susceptible to the predatory machinations of dictatorial regimes throughout different epochs.

2.2. Dan Simmons’ portrayal of Romania

Dan Simmons’ novel originated in the author’s response to the appalling plight of orphans in post-revolution Romania during the early 1990s. As he explains it, the strict birth control policies enforced by the communist regime had left over 600,000 children abandoned, relegated to crowded warehouses, and confined to steel cribs, where they endured severe deprivation of affection and care; caregivers resorted to injecting the orphans with adult blood, thus exposing them to life-threatening diseases such as Hepatitis B and AIDS (qtd. in Ramsdell, 2013). Significantly, although laudably prompted by a humanitarian crisis, Dan Simmons also opted to capitalize on the Dracula myth, employing the horror genre to shed light on this real-life tragedy and its harrowing implications.

The novel’s hypotext mirroring is obvious from the very first page, when the readers encounter a team of six Western semi-officials (academics, a doctor (Kate Neuman), a minister (Father O’Rourke), entrepreneurs) who arrive in Romania “almost as soon as the shooting stopped [...] landing at Otopeni Airport just after midnight on December 29, 1989” (Simmons 1992: 9), a chronological precision that marks the emergence of a post-communist body politic, inviting scrutiny from the West. The six Westerners are shown around by Radu Fortuna, a mysterious guide who somehow cynically and proudly displays the unimaginable wounds that have been plaguing the country under Ceaușescu. A whole catalogue of horrors is cunningly

aimed at stirring the foreigners' generosity and casting them as healers of a nation having suffered under a harsh dictatorship. The settings are decisively (Ceașescu, or post-communist) Gothic: "dreamlike, almost hallucinatory [...] maze stone tunnels", stretching for miles, "storerooms with automatic weapons on shelves, gas masks hanging from hooks [...] command centers [...] some destroyed as if madmen with axes had vented their wrath on them", with "blood on the walls and floors [...]" (idem: 15). In the Timișoara morgue, the Westerners are shown "rows of corpses across the tabletops [...] at least three of four hundred bodies", "a young woman" who lies with "the red-rimmed wall of her opened belly and abdomen", on top of her a "seven-month foetus" of a boy looking like a "discarded doll", a boy "about ten", arms and ankles tied with barbed wires, "layers of eggs that made it look as if the child were wearing white goggles" (idem: 18-19).

Horrific as they are, the dead bodies on show are but a mere preamble to the real nightmare of the plight of the surplus of Romania's children, the consequence of Ceașescu's deranged policy of forced births. In Sebeș, the next destination of the Western group, orphan children in the thousands are kept in unhygienic "warehouse"-like compounds (idem: 22), in actual "low metal cages", in a state of advanced weakness, on their "excrement-smear rag", while the orphanages of Sibiu host the well-kept secret of the AIDS infected children, in a country where the disease does not officially exist (idem: 24). Accompanying this institutionalized exercise in the agony of the physical bodies of the most vulnerable of Romanians, the small town of Copșa Mica, the next destination of the foreigners details the wounds inflicted on both workers' bodies (suffering from lead intoxication) and the environment, by a demented exploitation of natural resources. The sight that welcomes the Westerners is that of natural and human landscapes chromatically distorted, with snow-covered hills and icicles hanging from buildings turned black, under a visible haze of black air; people with soot-covered faces move soundlessly through inches of ash and soot, reminiscent of active volcanoes of faraway geographies (idem: 28); the uncanny *Bleak House* imagery of environmental sickness adds layers of signification to the macabre realities of post-Ceașescu Romania.

As the narrative proceeds, the real cause for the profound and veiled horror that has befallen Romania's orphans is disclosed as the proliferation of vampirism, characterized by an escalating demand for human blood. Remarkably, its *modus operandi* and organizational structure bear striking resemblance to that of established entities such as the Mafia or the feared Romanian Securitate, into which it has infiltrated. Furthermore, the novel portrays the vampires' penetration into Romania's political framework as a much older phenomenon, with their influence stretching as far back as the Romanian principalities, potentially predating the reign of Vlad the Impaler. Interestingly, when viewed from a scientific and objective perspective, vampires themselves - subjected to scrutiny by the American haematologist Kate Neuman, who diligently seeks a cure for her adopted son Joshua's mysterious ailment, that appears to stem from his time in a Romanian orphanage - are portrayed almost sympathetically; they are no more the "fanged creatures of the night", but "members of a family who did have to ingest human blood in order to survive their own faulty immune systems [...] explaining how "secrecy, solidarity, inbreeding"

would cause increased “recessive traits”, “much as with the haemophilia which plagued the royal houses of Europe” (idem: 136). In Nietzschean terms, as discussed in *The Gay Science* (Nietzsche 1972: 349), the desire for self-preservation is a symptom of suffering or limitation in the fundamental concept of life, which is truly about seeking to increase one’s power and capacity; thus, in Simmons’ novel, when survival is ensured and vampirism becomes institutionalized, such as during the communist dictatorship, the basic instinct for survival transforms into a Nietzschean *will to power* and domination.

The narrative builds on the gradual disclosure of the result of pervasive, non-human, vampiric social and political manipulation. Bereft of agency over their own existence, Romanian citizens - inclusive of physically capable adults, not only the vulnerable demographic of orphans - find themselves relegated to a state of political inertia. They either assume the role of passive agents, conforming to Foucault’s notion of “docile bodies”, or are reduced to mere reservoirs of sustenance for the non-human entities that govern their fate. At the same time, in line with Esposito’s (2008) argument, albeit in a different context, vampires (or at least some of them) despite their intrinsically horrific nature, imperviousness to ‘humanity’, and lethal disposition toward humans, may paradoxically serve as catalysts for fostering human solidarity against a non-human threat. In the novel, Ceaușescu’s surprising deficiency in political acumen, which precipitated his execution, is attributed to an enigmatic figure lurking in the shadows, a Dark Advisor, none other than Dracula himself (Simmons 1992: 12).

The fictional spread of vampirism during both the communist and post-communist eras depicted in the novel serves as a metaphorical representation of the enduring presence of the Securitate and *apparatchik* systems, which persisted even following Ceaușescu’s downfall. Even the recently established political authority is depicted as culpable for the violence and insatiable appetite for bloodshed, mirroring the unsettling echoes of the clashes between anti-communist demonstrators and the loyalist forces of the dictator in the waning days of the regime. The CBS Evening News broadcasts images of:

Miners running amok in Romania, commandeering trains to take them to Bucharest, where the rioting continued in some sort of unfocused protest against the government [...] many of whom were Securitate agents in miners’ coveralls—to brutalize their own people [...] men smashing windows, tossing Molotov cocktails at buildings, using crowbars against doors. (Simmons 1992: 133)

This is a political landscape with Hobbesian undertones of a *war of all against all*, as Father O’Rourke (the ally of the American haematologist Kate Neuman), comments:

I don’t think we have any real understanding of the power struggles going on here [...] We’ve got the government versus the protesters versus the miners versus the intellectuals, and the strigoi seem to be pulling most of the strings on each side. Maybe they’re fighting among themselves, I don’t know. (Simmons 1992: 301-302)

This assessment of Romanian politics recalls Gelder's (1994: 8) "paranoid consciousness", that is "the belief in a deeper 'reality' in Romania, of events ultimately manipulated by vampires", "the sinister aphorism which defines Ceaușescu's regime for McPherson, one of the Westerner visitors as 'what you see is not true . . . and what is true you cannot see'". The idea of secrecy, of the impenetrability of the brutal realities that affect the physical and political bodies of post-Ceaușescu Romania, as they appear to a bewildered Western observer also resonate with a certain type of physical "contingency" which Frank (1995: 31), albeit in a different context, describes as "[...] the body's condition of being subject to forces that cannot be controlled"; for example, the infantile body is seen as contingent, that is "burping, spitting and defecating according to its own internal needs and rhythms" but socially benefitting from a grace period for the acquisition of control over their actions. On the other hand, when adults experience a loss of control, societal expectations dictate that they presently reclaim it, or at least adeptly conceal any such lapse in control. In the Romanian context, as the narrative details it, the surpassing of the state of political infantilism is a tenuous process, because it is fraught with inner struggles and conflict.

Father O'Rourke's puzzled Western perspective finds its counterpart in the Romanian diagnostic of recent politics, portrayed as unproblematic and lacking in mystery; this interpretation is rooted in the cultural context of Romania, where the population is conditioned to acknowledge dark traditions, signifying the divergence in perception between Western observers and those immersed in the cultural intricacies of Romanian society. For example, Stelian Tănase argues that communist elites, shaped by their underground past, continued clandestine operations even when in power, remaining alienated and illegitimate in the public eye. He portrays them as "eternal creatures of darkness", perpetually trapped in their past (qtd in Nicolescu and Bucurenci 2008: 277-278). Thus, Simmons' portrayal of vampires, depicted as foreign entities preying upon and exploiting the robust bodies of Romanians, finds parallelism in the historical reality of Romanian Communist apparatchiks.

This recent historical perspective is enhanced by the analysis of what can be called the "Dracula text," particularly the private episodes titled *Dreams of Blood and Iron*. Consequently, in the third section of this study, I will provide a more thorough historical and personal evaluation of vampirism and its impact on both the afflicted individuals and the broader population.

3. Dracula as the wounded/ wounding narrator

[...] the natural length of human life is put down at one hundred years [...] only people who exceed the age of ninety who attain euthanasia [...] simply cease to live rather than die. To come to one's end before the age of ninety, means to die of disease, in other words, prematurely.' (Schopenhauer, qtd in Bauman 1992: 19)

Schopenhauer's insights on life, old age, and death are also valid in the context of fictional vampires, although, since they are cursed to live for centuries, their lifespan exceeds the "natural length of human life"; but they can also decide to "simply cease to live rather than die". The narrative voice of the vampiric self

in Simmons' novel thus depicts what Karaman (2023: 1159) described as "one of the most intriguing objects of horror", "the uncanniness of his situation trapped in between life and death, as a monstrosity in existence", which underscores "the very impossibility of dying or annihilation". The episodes titled *Dreams of Blood and Iron* explore the inner world of the dying Dracula, as he is determined to cease being a villain (a Shakespearean, *Richard III* reversal) and ultimately cease altogether. Here, I am suggesting the positioning of the reader as a clinician, adept in what Charon (2006: 4) calls "*narrative medicine*", that is "medicine practiced with these narrative skills of recognizing, absorbing, interpreting, and being moved by the stories of illness". These episodes frame an illness narrative, wherein Dracula assumes the role of the (lifelong) patient. Paradoxically, his dreamt memories foster odd moments of empathetic connection that mark the collapse of the grand narrative surrounding the ruthless blood seeker archetype. Instead, the quintessential vampire emerges as an embodiment of *Everyman*, intimately intertwined with humanity's fate, destined to confront, and endure its inevitable demise. The construction of his illness narrative as a life narrative reinforces Dracula's role as a witness to both his tumultuous past and his status as a terminally ill patient. Drawing from May's (1991: 131) assertion, albeit within a different context, it prompts an ethical examination of how he rises to the challenges presented by his circumstances, markedly in terms of assuming responsibility for his past actions.

Illness narratives can be categorized as *chaos* (Frank 1995: 97), *restitution* (idem: 75), and *quest* (idem: 115). The first depicts suffering as chaotic, confusing, and lacking resolution, the second aims to re-establish a sense of normalcy and equilibrium post-illness or trauma, and the third marks a journey of self-discovery, and a search for meaning in the face of adversity. Dracula's narrative comprises them all, although they frequently overlap. Nevertheless, the chaos narrative appears to be markedly absent, since his condition is revealed early in his life and internalized as a symbol of power over others, rather than a lack. He recalls his first 'consecration', the Ceremony of the Chalice, at the age of four, when surrounded by his father and other members of the family he tastes blood for the first time, after witnessing his first executions ordered by his father. From that moment on, he becomes entangled in a regime of sovereign power centred on 'sanguinity,' where blood embodies both vitality and familial ties, while also serving as a harbinger of grotesque acts committed to uphold political authority and familial lineage. Historically, as Bynum (2007: 187) notes:

Sanguis and cruor, blood was ambiguous because profoundly bipolar. Each term had both positive and negative connotations in the fifteenth century: the shedding of cruor could be heroic, healthbringing, criminal or polluting: sanguis could be congested and unhealthy, or the very stuff of life itself...blood – all blood – signified life and death.

In the novel, Dracula makes his narrative entrance on the very first page, disguised as the aging philanthropist Vernon Deacon Trent. Symbolically, when he reaches Sighişoara, the place of his birth, he reveals his identity to Radu Fortuna (also a vampire), as he confines himself in a room, prepared to face his death, among other aging members of his "Family of the Night" (Simmons 1992: 35). As subject,

as well as maker of history, in this contemplation of the “future”, Dracula envisions a slow death, marked by the traumatic dreams of his memories. This decision to refrain from consuming human blood parallels the choice made by cancer patients, who, having endured chemotherapy to delay the inevitable, ultimately opt to discontinue treatment, and enter a state of pseudo-‘living’ characterized by relinquished control and reduced mobility.

But by then, I will no longer be the aged but vital Vernor Deacon Trent; I will be only a mummified caricature of the man with the strange face in the portrait above my bed. I lay back deeper into the pillows, my yellowed fingers frail above the bedclothes. I do not open my eyes as—one by one—the eldest Family members in the room file by to kiss my ring a final time and then to stand, whispering and murmuring like peasants at a funeral, in the hall outside (ibid.).

Dracula’s narrative voice in the episodes titled *Dreams of Blood and Iron* has a double function. Initially, it impartially chronicles events within their contemporary environment, characterized by widespread bloodshed and retaliatory acts against adversaries and perceived threats. Nevertheless, more importantly, his illness narrative encapsulates significant personal traumas from his extensive existence, such as his father’s surrender of him and his brother Radu to Sultan Murad II, as a gesture of submission to Ottoman power, the harrowing memories of his father’s execution, and his brother’s burial alive by a rival contender for the throne. Thus, gradually, as it delves farther into its memories, this voice evolves towards reaching an “ethic of recollection”, when the sharing of memories of past actions means “taking responsibility for what was done” (Frank 1995: 132).

Despite the harrowing nature of his recollections, they bear witness to the ‘rationale’ behind reciprocal destruction, where armies are driven to unleash unimaginable brutality upon their adversaries. The traumatic memories are shaped by a certain Gothic aesthetic of horror, arguably pairing fiction with Francisco de Goya’s series of eighty-two engravings known as the *Disasters of War* (1810), which frequently depict scenes of individual bodies undergoing horrible mutilations. Similarly, Dracula initiates an exploration of the darker recesses of his psyche as he recalls the litany of horrors he has inflicted upon tens of thousands – including impalement, disembowelment, and agonizing torture – of Turks, Saxons, and his own subjects. One notably gruesome episode entails the macabre strategy of outfitting dying lepers in Turkish garb before dispatching them to the Sultan’s encampments to mingle with his troops, and coercing individuals afflicted with syphilis and the Black Death into joining the Turkish ranks, incentivized with generous rewards for disseminating these deadly diseases (Simmons 1992: 278). There is hardly any sensationalism in this strategy; as Stephanou (2014: 54) claims, allegedly Zygmunt Korybutowicz’s forces, during the 1422 siege of Carolstein Castle in Bohemia, utilized biological warfare tactics, catapulting decaying corpses and manure onto defenders, and thus potentially causing a fever outbreak.

Other chilling scenes of unimaginable tortures depicted by Dracula evoke parallels with Artaud’s artistic expressions, as commented on by Kristeva (1980: 25), who claims that such vivid and visceral descriptions not only provoke intense emotional

reactions, but also serve as manifestations of underlying psychophysiological tensions within the individual psyche; they originate in the realization that the ego's intrinsic past and prospective future are intricately intertwined within the unsettling depths of corporeal existence. Dracula's amalgamation with the historical figure of Vlad Țepeș, still revered as a heroic leader by many Romanians, yet considered a monster by the Saxons, Turks, and Wallachians of old, profoundly influences his perspective on contemporary conflicts. The present-day events interpreted through the lens of his historical legacy appear to him as mere parodies of his own past actions, especially when contemplating their environmental repercussions. Concurrently, he also engages in ethical reflection, grappling with the moral dimensions of his past deeds and their implications for his sense of responsibility in perpetuating violence:

the roads [were] swollen with weeping refugees from our own cities and villages, oxen carts and plow horses and entire clans on foot, carrying their meager belongings, while behind us the flames lighted the horizon while the skies darkened with the smoke of our self-immolation. I lay here this winter just past and eavesdropped on the Family housekeepers talking on the stairs and landing—my hearing is still that good when I wish it to be—and they whisper to each other about Saddam Hussein's war with the Americans and about the oil fires he lit in his wrath blackening the desert skies. They mutter about the fighting in Yugoslavia to the west and shake their kerchiefed heads about how terrible modern war is. Saddam Hussein is a child compared to Hitler and Hitler was an infant compared to me. I once followed Hitler's retreating army into his heartland and was amazed at the artifacts and infrastructure he left intact. Saddam set fire to the desert; in my day, I took some of the lushest land in Europe and turned it into a desert. (Simmons 1992: 277)

Dracula's dreaming of his horror filled memories conveys a message resonant with Canetti's (1978: 249) perspective on humanity as survivors: "the most elementary and obvious form of success is to remain alive," despite the immense bloodshed it may entail. Murder looms at the other spectrum of survival: "He wants to kill so that he can survive others; he wants to stay alive so as not to have others surviving him" (idem: 247). Whether facing a single enemy, a pack, or a whole crowd, survival is paramount, with higher-ranking individuals, particularly generals, perceiving survival as their exclusive entitlement, equating victory with their own survival, whereas battles result in a mixture of fallen comrades and enemies, rendering the battlefield a "neutral" ground akin to epidemics. Behind this logic, there lies the survival of the Patriarch, "always imagined alone in his own generation", the initiator of a new race who, "as long as he has grandsons and great-grandsons alive it does not matter if some of his sons have died before him" (idem: 249).

Furthermore, Canetti's insights on death, survival, disease, and epidemics resonate with Dracula's life-long strategy of not only survival but preservation of power. Although long confined to a state of perpetual decline, given his enduring resilience honed over centuries, and his body's sustained attempts to repair itself, he remains sceptical of his impending demise, despite abstinence from the Sacrament; his musings also reflect on the perennial underestimation he has faced from his adversaries, a recurring theme in his long history (Simmons 1992: 249). In this disclosure of his declining powers thinly veiling the underlying threat of violence

against enemies and incompetent followers, Dracula's is, to use Frank's (1995: 46) words (emphasis in the original text), "the dominating body [that] defines itself in *force*"; there is a fundamental distinction, though, as "most people do not tell stories about themselves dominating others". Moreover, "the dominating body assumes the *contingency* of disease but never accepts it", as in the case of a real patient who lived with leukaemia for three-and-a half years of which for twenty-seven months he was in remission, and who "insisted he was not afraid of death but of the wait. It was never knowing that had haunted him" (idem: 47).

Dracula's prolonged illness mirrors in fiction the experiences of real patients. There is an overwhelming sense of anxiety pervading his recounted dreamt memories, and moments of awakening, specific of chaos narratives which, in the case of real patients are clinically dismissed since they are perceived as merely "documenting 'depression'" (idem: 110). Growing ever more desperate at his eluding death, Dracula considers refusing "food or water" although he knows that his "body would cannibalize itself over a period of months rather than die willingly", and he is not prepared "to face that torture" although he has "known more pain in my single lifetime than most generations of families have known cumulatively" (idem: 276). Nevertheless, it is specifically this accumulated suffering that has inspired in him what Frank (1995: 132) called, albeit in a different context, an "ethic of solidarity and commitment"; hence, he allowed for his son, Joshua, to be adopted by the haematologist Kate Newman in the US, so that his blood can provide the cure for cancer, AIDS, and many other diseases. One of the most significant moments in the narrative depicts the encounter between Dracula and Kate Newman, who presents him with a cure that he himself had amended, and which signifies the shift from pain, anxiety, and depression to hope for a healthy continuation of life, divorced from acts of aggression (albeit still vampiric). Read through Frank's (1995: 110) lens, therefore, the previously prevalent chaos in Dracula's diagnosis can be reduced to a "treatable condition", which restores the "restitution narrative", with the "clinical staff [...] once again in comfortable control" and the reality "classified as either amenable or resistant to treatment", no longer representative of "an existential treat".

Dracula's illness narrative also displays the characteristics of an "ethic of inspiration" (Frank 1995: 133); stemmed from woundedness, not concealing the agony of history carved on the body and mind, it can inspire others – like Lucian, his non-vampiric son, to whom he has been a secret protector and "mentor" (Simmons 1992: 333) - to carry on his ultimate plan of ridding the world of all the other vampires. This grand gesture of final, fully assumed responsibility for the incalculable damage caused by his vampiric destiny paradoxically isolates him from his own. It also signifies the challenge posed by quest stories, usually represented via the metaphor of the Phoenix bird; such narratives can "present the turning process as too complete, and they can implicitly deprecate those who fail to rise out from their own ashes" (Frank 1995: 135). In Simmons' novel, the final encounter place of all the vampires, the citadel of Poenari will be blown up, while a triumphant and rejuvenated Dracula, having destroyed his own extended greedy family, will fly away in a helicopter – a symbolic overturn of Ceaușescu's failed attempt. As a result: "In the meantime, I have given up thoughts of dying soon. Such thoughts were the products of illness,

age, and bad dreams. I no longer have the bad dreams. Perhaps I will live forever.” (Simmons 1992: 379). The ultimate proof of his embracing his new, ethical destiny, in Levinas’ (1988: 159) words “the possibility of a half-opening to the other” is his decision not to retrieve his son Joshua from his adoptive mother and instead “let the woman doctor raise him and learn from him”, the price to pay for his having been “a source of terror” to his “people and employees”, when he would actually “have welcomed being a savior” (Simmons 1992: 379).

4. Conclusion

Simmons’ *Children of the Night* transcends genre limitations, while adeptly employing Gothic tropes, to explore the “political sickness” of post-Ceaușescu Romania. Vampirism serves as a potent metaphor for the nation’s ailments, concurrently reinforcing and subverting the traditional association of Romania with the land of Dracula. By framing the episodes titled *Dreams of Blood and Iron* as an illness narrative and positing Dracula as a “wounded storyteller” who embodies disease and mortality, I suggested that the phases of chaos, restitution, and the quest for meaning can be read as features of a nation grappling with post-totalitarian recovery. Conversely, I examined the blurring of the lines between political manipulation and monstrous predation to question the efficacy of calculated power games, revealing their true nature as acts of overt violence and aggression.

On a more personal note, writing from the perspective of a Romanian who has a deep-seated interest in both Gothic literature and political dynamics, I witnessed firsthand many of the violent episodes depicted by Simmons. The “dreams of blood and iron” (subtracting the vampiric undertones) were dreamt by many in my generation, who, as youths, sought to navigate the labyrinth of political manipulations and aggression that paradoxically intensified in the post-Ceaușescu era. Confused, hopeful, and angry, we were, I can confidently claim, frequently ‘haunted’ by Eminescu, the Romanian national poet’s invocation (Eminescu 2017: 366): *Cum nu vii tu, Țepeș doamne...* (“Why don’t you come, Lord Țepeș...”, *my trans.*), while struggling to exorcise the national and personal darkness within us and put the phantoms of the human body politic to a well-deserved rest.

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