

West Meets East as Monks Purge 'Infidels' in *The Historian*

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Abstract: *One more time, a work featuring the grotesque figure of the vampire emerges from the shackles of the Middle Ages to top the list of recent fiction best sellers. Already being translated into thirty-five languages and having been purchased for two million dollars from its first time novelist even before its publication, *The Historian* (2005) by Elisabeth Kostova entraps its readers in a series of breath-taking events promising to unravel deeply hidden ancient secrets and crucial truths. This paper looks at these so-called deeply held secrets showing that through the genre of the fantastic, rather than escape and evade reality, the writer has negotiated contemporary cultural anxieties and conflicts. These are referred to in the title of this article, the age old battle between West and East and how the West perceives this clash in the form of an exonerating battle between Good and Evil, or in this case between Monks and 'Infidels'.*

***The Historian*: a synopsis:**

The title of the novel carries the publisher's note: 'To you, perceptive reader, I bequeath my history...' And indeed the novel starts in 1972 in Amsterdam when the protagonist, a sixteen year old girl, feels bored one evening in her father's library and finds a blank ancient medieval book with a wood cut of a dragon. Inside this book, she comes across a number of yellowed letters addressed to 'My dear and unfortunate successor'. When she asks her father about the origin of those letters, a disquieting story is reluctantly recounted. The readers are then engaged in three major story lines which are cleverly sustained through a series of awe-inspiring events and multigenerational letters. The first one, chronologically speaking, takes us to 1930 when Professor Bartolomew Rossi starts his research into Dracula. The second story line goes to 1950, when Paul, the protagonist's father, picks up the research to find the whereabouts of his mentor, Rossi, who goes missing after disclosing his belief that Dracula is still alive. This story line involves the protagonist's parents Paul and Helen, who is also Rossi's daughter, as they try to trace the footsteps of

Dracula, and ends with the disappearance of Helen. The third and main story line starts in 1972 with the protagonist finding the mysterious ancient book and being thrust into the labyrinth of uncovering her parents' past which is bound up with a mind-blowing evil in medieval history.

The reader, therefore, is engaged in a long series of letters over three generations linking the protagonist to one of the most macabre figures in history and fiction, the Impaler, Vlad III. The quest into uncovering the burial place of the vampire takes an almost Faustian direction as the reader witnesses one historian, scholar, librarian and curator after another losing his health, sanity and ultimately life in the process. The reader travels with these scholars to Turkey, Romania, Bulgaria, Hungary and France decoding messages, riddles, woodcuts of a dragon, local folktales, songs and lyrics dating to centuries of furtive stories. The protagonist is finally left with the decision to undertake the same perilous quest when her father, a diplomat, disappears after leaving her a note that he is searching for her long-presumed dead mother. The pursuit ends with the protagonist, who remains unnamed throughout the novel, finally finding both parents in a Monastery in the South of France after they manage to overcome and defeat the vampire. The tragedy does not end there, for we learn that the mother, who has been bitten by a vampire librarian, dies from an unknown disease leaving her daughter with a legacy sustained by a number of blank dragon stamped books distributed throughout history. The novelist ingeniously blends fact with fiction in this work of epic proportions, leaving the reader to ponder on how all these events could be relevant to the present day, which is one of the main aims to be uncovered in this paper.

Introduction:

Arising from ancient mysterious origins, the vampire has never ceased to inspire authors and readers throughout the history of time. Every time we assume that the last word has been written on the subject, a new work of literature, T.V. series, or headline appears featuring this macabre motif. One such example is the recent announcement in the world of real estate of the sale of Dracula's Castle for a price in the nine-figure euro range. In fact, no figure has managed to mix successfully fiction with fantasy as well as that of the vampire. The variety of forms and shapes that it

has managed to assume are indicative of the versatility of this awe inspiring motif to flexibly reconfigure itself from one country and period of time to another. It is therefore necessary to examine some of the reasons that such a figure has attracted writers and readers worldwide, by examining *The Historian* (2005) by Kostova with special reference to some insightful studies on the fantastic.

What distinguishes Kostova's vampire novel from previous works of literature on the same legendary figure is her ability to blend imagination with reality to the extent that any distinction between them, on the part of the reader, becomes very hard to attain. Confronting the vampire, a figure long believed to be imaginary, arouses what Freud (1919) referred to as the 'Uncanny': when the distinction between imagination and reality is blurred. Indeed the readers are engaged in one of the essential elements of fantasy, according to Todorov (1973:25), when they hesitate between belief and disbelief in the credibility of the events. In a study by Scholes (1975) readers are offered a space in fantasy that allows them to depart from the primary world of reality into the alternative world of the fantastic only to return and confront their reality. Further studies locate subversive perspectives and contemporary cultural anxieties and fears in the infatuation with the secondary world of the fantastic. This paper shows how the author navigated the various levels of signification offered by the controversial figure of the vampire starting with totally personal interpretations of historical events and ending with a national consensus and overall anxiety.

The "shadowing claws" of history:

In the 'Note to the Reader' dated 2008 the protagonist acknowledges, as any scholar would, her debt to a number of historians, librarians, curators and scholars who have helped her explore and unravel her past history. The journey that she— a historian and history lecturer, her father— a diplomat and former student of history, his mentor— a history professor, and her mother— an anthropologist and history specialist — all find themselves undertaking leads them, according to the protagonist, to 'one of the darkest pathways into history.' 'Darkest' in the sense of the evil it reveals and the brutality that it uncovers in the march of history. The author makes use of a number of scholarly

methods such as: the examination of manuscripts, letters, maps, and folklore in libraries, museums, churches, cathedrals and geographically distant villages. This is done to establish two purposes: first, to ground the story in a real place and time; and second, to convince the reader that what is being undertaken is an objective, authentic pursuit of historical truth familiar to Western scientific scholarship. However, an examination of the author's approach to history betrays her age-old subjective Western attitude towards the East, which is antagonistic and exonerating as the title of this paper indicates.

In her foreword, the narrator refers to history as a perilous realm that has the power of haunting, unseating, and shaping the present; 'And it is not only reaching back that endangers us; sometimes history itself reaches inexorably forward for us with its shadowing claws' (Kostova 2005:vii). Her quest to find an age-old, hidden secret seems to have already been molded in its initial launch by the 'shadowing claws' of history. The historical pursuit is partial, reflecting the researcher's own biases and Western prejudices. The historian's interest, according to the protagonist's father, Paul, 'is partly a reflection of ourselves, perhaps a part of ourselves we would rather not examine except through the medium of scholarship; it is also true that as we steep ourselves in our interests, they become more and more a part of us (ibid.:263).

The author's interest in the historical basis of this vampire story dates back to stories her father, a professor, used to tell her while they traveled 'through Europe' (Kostova 2006). Another source of information and inspiration is her husband who 'grew up in communist Bulgaria' (ibid.) and traveled with her into Eastern Europe. He was her consultant for the book and helped her research many aspects of the European historical and political sections. And it appears to be from their seemingly partial point of view that events are woven in the novel. Indeed nature itself, seen through their eyes, seems 'saturated' with historical biases about the East:

There is something vastly mysterious for me about the shift one sees, along that route, from the Islamic world to the Christian, from the Ottoman to the Austro-Hungarian, from the Muslim to the Catholic and Protestant. It is a graduation of town, to architecture, of gradually receding minarets blended with the advancing church domes, of the very look of forest and

riverbank, so that little by little you begin to believe you can read in nature itself the saturation of history. Does the shoulder of a Turkish hillside really look so different from the slope of a Magyar meadow? Of course not, and yet the difference is as impossible to erase from the eye of the historian that informs it is from the mind (Kostova 2005:316).

The protagonist's quest is predisposed by what she refers to as the 'painfully familiar . . . conflict between an Islamic East and a Judeo-Christian West (ibid.:viii). It is within this conflict and its impact on history (from a Western point of view) that the source of all evil is ascertained in the novel. In an interview (2006), Kostova maintains that history resonates with its darkest events; 'the worst deeds and events in history do live forever through their endless repercussions and related tragedies'.

The sack of the city:

The novel goes back in time to one of these 'unforgivable' episodes that continue to reverberate in modern times, the sacking of the Byzantine capital of the world Constantinople, by the 'infidel' Ottomans. The trip back into history's 'dark moment' is initially subtly undergone by the author through the eyes of the American diplomat who gives the readers what appears to be a one-sided perspective into history through his first ever acquaintance with the Ottomans' Capital, Istanbul:

It had an *Arabian Nights* quality that no number of honking cars or businessmen in Western suits could dissolve. The first city here, Constantinople, the capital of Byzantium and the first capital of the Christian Rome, must have been splendid beyond belief, I thought – a marriage of Rome wealth and early Christian mysticism. By the time we found some room in the old quarter of Sultanahmet, I had received a **dizzying** glimpse of dozens of mosques and minarets, bazaars hung with fine textiles, even a flash of the many-domed, four-horned Hagia Sophia billowing above the peninsula (Kostova 2005:199-200).
[My emphasis]

At this stage of the novel there is a blend of West and East symbolized by the 'dizzying' vision of mosques and minarets, where church domes had the first word, in what historically used to be the capital of ancient Rome. Gradually this blending becomes ruptured as the observer unconsciously shows signs of a

biased sense of not having really lost the Christian battle with the Ottomans. The very name of the Ottoman capital is but a sign of the Byzantine legacy, for; ‘The very name *Istanbul* is a Byzantine word meaning the city. You see, even the Ottomans couldn't demolish Constantinople; only rename it – with a Byzantine name, at that (ibid.:203).

Gradually the real vision of the city's history is acutely perceived, as a regretful disaster and a curse, rather than a conquest. The protagonist's mother, who is herself a Romanian descendant of Vlad III Dracula, offers a prejudiced perspective of the clash between West and East:

It is not possible to think about this part of the world without Byzantium . . . The conquest of Constantinople in 1453 by Mehmet II was one of the greatest tragedies in history. He broke down these walls with his cannonballs and then he sent his armies in to pillage and murder for three days. The soldiers raped the young girls and boys on the altars of the churches, even Saint Sofia. They stole the icons and all the other holy treasures to melt down the gold, and they threw the relics of the saints in the streets for the dogs to chew. Before that, this was the most beautiful city in history (ibid.:203-4).

Turgut, a Turkish Shakespearean scholar, however, offers view which betrays the author's attempts to negotiate her stance towards the East at this point in the novel. As the Turkish professor explains; ‘My father told me about the wonderful horses on the Basilica of San Marco in Venice, stolen from Byzantium by crusaders. The Christian invaders were just as bad as the Ottoman ones you see’ (ibid.:463).

Although the protagonist's father articulates a milder view on the event of the sacking of Constantinople than her mother does, he certainly puts forward the fundamental rhetorical question about the validity of such historical events to both contemporary lives in Istanbul where minarets coexist with church domes, and, more importantly, to the modern Western mind:

I was silent. The city was still beautiful, with its delicate, rich colors and its exquisite domes and minarets, whatever atrocities had occurred here long ago. I was beginning to understand why an **evil moment** five hundred years ago was so real to Helen, **but what did this really have to do with our lives in the present?** It struck me suddenly that perhaps I had come a long

way for nothing, to this magical place with this complicated woman [Helen], looking for an Englishman [Rossi] who might be on a bus trip to New York. I swallowed the thought and tried instead to tease her a little. 'How is it that you know so much about history? I thought you were an anthropologist.'

'I am,' she said gravely. 'But you cannot study cultures without a knowledge of their history' (ibid.:204). [My emphasis]

To an objective or neutral historian an event in history is usually recorded free of any moral ramifications. However, in the above excerpt it seems that the author believed that an historical event which occurred five hundred years ago reverberates with evil and will continue to do so, tainting the cultures involved.

The impact of this 'evil moment' (ibid.) has been registered in almost all historical books and treatises written on the fall of Constantinople throughout time, reverberating mixed messages to different cultures. To the East such an event is seen as a positive advancement of civilization under the seizure of Islam. In *Islam at War* (2003) by Nafziger and Walton the authors write the following for example:

The Siege of Constantinople was one of the great turning points in human history. Mehmet's guns broke down not just the fabled walls of a proud city, but also the last vestiges of 2,000 years of Roman imperial history. The Eastern Empire, which had more than its share of disasters, and seemingly more than a cat, would not rebound from this blow. After 800 years of battering, Islam had finally broken down the guardian of the Christian west.

Mehmet set about reconstructing his now largely devastated capital. It had between 60,000 and 70,000 inhabitants. Most were killed or sold into slavery, leaving only 10,000 in the city by the time Mehmet began rebuilding it. He repopulated the city by giving gifts of property and tax concessions to all who would come. Steadily, the city was rebuilt to a new glory under the Ottomans. (100).

However, to the Christian West, it was a disaster threatening to wipe out all traces of civilization; 'The city, the symbol of the globalization of Christianity, fell and with it would all history' (Papathanasiou 2004:226).

An exhaustive enlisting of references and attitudes to this historical event in the history of thought and literature is not within the main parameters of this paper. However, for the purpose of comparison, there is one instance that can rival the fall of Constantinople and its consequences in Western minds and consciences, and that is the tragic fall of Troy and the desecration of its temples. The comparison can be justified in the sense that the fall of this great city entailed a series of curses on the Greek heroes who undertook the fight against Troy, most importantly Odysseus, who spent more than twenty years wandering until he was finally allowed by the gods to return to a sacked Ithaca and slay the suitors, and in a way reverse and purge the Greek guilt-ridden conscience (Dilworth 1994:1).

Similarly, in *The Historian* (2005), Constantinople not only fell, but had its most sacred place, Saint Sofia, like Apollo's temple, desecrated. This cast a curse or a plague on the Ottomans through the polluted figure of the vampire, whose role was like Odysseus', to purify the desecrating suitors of their 'infidel' acts and keep them at bay and from attacking the rest of Europe and the Western World.

The paradox of the vampire between fantasy and reality:

It is this so-called 'evil moment' in history that, according to the author and numerous historians, the vampire story finds its birthplace. After the conquest, it is said that Mehmet moved to Moldavia, and took Vlad III Dracula as a ransom against future aggression against his country. This historical basis for vampire stories foregrounds them in Western culture and reality (Clark 1994:38), which is essential in establishing the credibility of the events. However, whether attempting a scholarly or creative work, writers have used this origin to forge their own interpretation of history and 'reality'.

The author of *The Historian* (2005) locates in his history the source of the infectious cruelty of Vlad III 'the Impaler' who was captured as a boy and raised by the ruthless Ottomans and their janissaries. Like him, the janissaries were boys 'born Christian in places like Serbia and Wallachia and raised in Islam, trained in hatred of the way peoples they sprang from and unleashed on those peoples when they reached manhood, like falcons to kill' (Kostovo 2005:310). Such ruthless soldiers with

‘expressionless faces’ were trained to protect the sultan (ibid.) The ‘evil moment’, according to the author, resonates in such cruel soldiers bred to kill and impale their own people:

The soldiers who guarded the boy Dracula were masters in the art of torture, and he must have learned so much when he watched them... From that time there is a record of vampirism in Istanbul...his first victims were among the Ottomans, maybe the guards who became his friends. He left behind him "contamination" in the Ottoman empire (ibid.:215).

This contamination, according to Turgut, still exists in Istanbul as exists all over the modern world; ‘there is still evil to fight in our city, as there is everywhere’ (ibid.:216). Ironically, the role of the vampire in this novel seems to be later identified as that of an absolver of the omnipotent Eastern evil.

The preeminence of evil in the figure of the vampire is portrayed in the description of the Turkish Shakespearean scholar's study:

But the first impression I had of Turgut's study was not one of the preeminence of English Literature; I had instead the immediate sense of a darker presence, an obsession that had gradually overcome the milder influence of the English works he wrote about. This presence leaped out at me suddenly as a face, **a face that was everywhere**, meeting my gaze with arrogance from a print behind a desk, from a stand on the table, from an odd piece of embroidery on one wall, from the cover of a portfolio, from a sketch near the window. **It was the same face in every case, caught in different poses and different media, but always the same gaunt-cheeked, mustached, medieval visage** (ibid:260) [My emphasis].

The obsession with collecting vampire relics reflects not only a hobby on the part of Western and Eastern scholars in *The Historian* (2005), but rather a universal admiration for this controversial figure; ‘It is extraordinary how many pictures of his face still float loose in our city, once you are watching out for them (ibid.:261). It is a worthwhile purpose to connect the literary motif of the medieval vampire in the novel with the cultural sensibility, and especially anxiety about the Muslim East, which is manifested in many different forms of contemporary discourse.

The vampire's omnipresence, highlighted by extreme fear and apprehension, is sensed by all the characters in the novel and

is indicative of a whole culture's paranoia and anxiety. Descriptions of the portrait of the vampire betray these all-present, fretful sensations:

The velvet opened to reveal a life-size and radiantly lifelike painting in oils, the head and shoulders of a young thick-necked, virile man. His hair was long; heavy black curls tumbled around his shoulders. The face was handsome and cruel in the extreme, with luminously pale skin, unnaturally bright green eyes, along straight nose with flaring nostrils. His red lips were curved and sensual under a drooping dark mustache, but also tightly compressed as if to control a twitching of the chin. He had sharp cheekbones and heavy black eyebrows below a peaked cap of dark green velvet, with a brown-and-white feather threaded into the front. It was a face full of life but completely devoid of compassion, brimming with strength and alertness but without stability of character. **The eyes were the most unnerving feature of the painting; they fixed us with a penetration almost alive in its intensity, and after a second I looked away for relief** (ibid.) [My emphasis].

It is quite relevant that the portrait of the vampire, one of the most formidable yet mesmerizing creatures of folklore (Dunes1998:vii), is kept hidden behind velvet curtains. This symbolizes, according to Briggs (1977:191-2), our attempts to keep our repressed fears and obsessions hidden, only to surface when we meet such agents of fear and evil in the form of the all-observing and penetrative eyes of the vampire. Such eyes face us, whether we admit it or not, with our own inner 'secret self'; they confront reality by showing the other side of life, the side that people are afraid of acknowledging as human (Fiedler 1978:13-36).

The Uncanny is aroused as the American diplomat confronts the vampire's portrait. Uncanny effects are often produced, as Freud says, 'when the distinction between imagination and reality is effaced, as when something that we have hitherto regarded as imaginary appears before us in reality (Belsey 2005:8). This long 'believed in' fantastic figure is so real to the observer and, more importantly, significant as a cultural symptom of fear and concern.

According to Todorov (1973:25), one of the essential elements of fantastic literature is hesitation; when the reader

hesitates between belief and disbelief in the credibility of the event. Harold Bloom, on the other hand, emphasizes that the most successful works of fantasy entail no sense of hesitation on the part of the reader who is absorbed by the events of a good plot, in an 'agnostic encounter of deep, strong reading'. Even when departing from reality, the author still needs to establish some sort of coherence to his work and take into account the reader's response to the text (Mathews 2002:3). According to Scholes (1975), however, 'fabulation' offers the author a space to depart from the reader's primary world into an alternative 'radically discontinuous' one only to return and "confront" our reality.

The author of *The Historian* (2005) successfully convinces the reader of the credibility of the events by using historical documents and letters that blend real places and real historical events with an impossible phenomenon of the undead vampire. The reader reaches certain points of hesitation but the narrator quickly thrusts the reader into one thrilling event after the other until he/she reaches the final closing words of the vampire at the end of a successfully consistent novel.

It should come as no surprise, therefore, to try to locate contemporary cultural anxieties within a work of fiction, especially a work that relies on the rather fantastic and gothic character of the medieval vampire. According to Nina Auerbach (1995) in *Our Vampires, Ourselves*, the gothic informs our cultural imagination. The vampire, she adds, is seen as a 'repository for cultural anxieties' and has the ability to travel and 'reconfigure' itself from one country to the other and throughout many ages and cultures. With each reconfiguration, it draws on the 'great memory' of that culture and country reflecting, according to Auerbach, the 'regional differences and cultural hierarchy (1995:5). They provide, as such, rich material for scholars to study and examine the 'localized collisions and collusions between boundaries of different identities (ibid.) which this paper will gradually pinpoint.

Such collusions, however, are presented in the novel through different characters and their conflicting reactions to the historical event of the sacking of Constantinople as mentioned before. The protagonist's father can only ponder on the paradoxical nature of the vampire phenomenon, a courtly medieval Christian forced into evil against his own people and the

Ottomans. To both worlds he has acquired the position of a misfit. To the Ottomans, he represents a plague, a festering evil created by their own hands and turned against them. To his people, he represents an outcast Impaler turned against his own people, an undead beast feeding on the blood of his victims. The historic enemies of Turks and Byzantines seem even more unified in their primeval human interests and adherence to human history that is full of invasions for the purposes of expanding and satisfying human greed for wealth and power:

I imagined ships from all over Eurasia bringing their bounty to the heart of an empire – first Christian, then Muslim – and docking at a city whose walls stretched down into the very sea. Vlad Dracula's forested stronghold, with its barbaric rituals of violence, seemed far indeed from this ancient, cosmopolitan world. No wonder he hated the Turks, and they him, I thought. And yet the Turks of Istanbul, with their crafts of gold and brass and silk, their bazaars and bookshops and myriad houses of worship, must have had much more in common with the Christian Byzantines they had conquered here than did Vlad, defying them from his frontier. Viewed from this centre of culture, he looked like a backwoods thug, a provincial ogre, a medieval redneck. I remembered the picture I had seen of him in an encyclopedia at home – that woodcut of an elegant, mustached face framed by courtly dress. It was a paradox (Kostova 2005:217).

A monster with a thousand faces purging the infidels:

The author's choice of the medieval vampire not only reflects local anxieties of Eastern countries where it originated, but by being omnipresent in its appeal to Western scholars and librarians expands such anxieties to a universal extent. In *A Monster with a Thousand Faces* (Frost 1989:2) the author traces the recurrence of such a literary figure in many works and throughout many centuries which is indicative of its ability as a literary motif to adapt itself to 'changing social and environmental conditions'. Oakes (2000:1), furthermore, sees in gothic themes and writings a 'literature of destabilization in that it inspires its readers to ask questions about themselves, their society, and the cosmos surrounding them. It serves as a cultural artifact, reflecting the **concerns and fears** not only of the time in which it is written but also of the time in which it is read'. [Emphasis mine]

Locating contemporary national anxieties and cultural values within a novel like *The Historian* (2005) where the main theme is the pursuit of a vampire is validated furthermore when Auerbach (1995) adds that 'Each feeds on his age distinctively because he embodies that age' (1). The vampire as such, Auerbach argues, mirrors the national moods and concerns of its location as well as the 'political pulse of the author' (ibid.:5).

Fears of the Cold War, for example, were directly represented in *The Historian* (2005) when Paul and Helen go to some countries in the Eastern European bloc in search of Rossi. In their pursuit they meet up with the evil repercussions of Communism, Hitlerism and Nazism, which are all seen as varieties on the same theme, the many faces of the same evil moment in history. However, one of the recurrent themes in their journey to the heart of Europe is that the vampire, the monster with all its macabre and sinful past. This monster confronts and exonerates Western fears by putting up a fight against such evil incidents in history symbolized by the Ottomans invasion, and keeping these invaders from overrunning the rest of Europe.

What is therefore new about *The Historian* (2005) is that the author, whilst relying on a number of conventions in vampire lore, especially those mentioned in Bram Stoker's novel *Dracula* (1897), manages to give her work an ingenious twist when she gives the medieval vampire the title of historian. Indeed, the vampire's *raison d'être* and criteria in selecting and abducting the main characters in the novel, is to help him classify and catalog his precious library collected over thousands of years. Although the vampire's library contains fictitious books collected throughout the ages, it nevertheless symbolizes his pursuit of the written history of mankind and his zest to overcome mortality and, more importantly, fight the 'infidels'. This is a statement we read and hear all over the media nowadays, associated with the 'war on terror' – terror being directly connected with the Muslim East.

The Western undead has returned to continue a long sought retribution against the infidel Easterners. In *The Historian* (2005), the vampire is not only given a rebirth of interest through the creation of such a best seller in fiction in contemporary times, but an absolution from all his previous gruesome sins by the Christian Church. This unexpected twist to vampire literature

comes at the very end of the novel where, having donated Ottoman treasures and money to a number of churches and monasteries in his native birthplace, the vampire is allowed by an abbot to construct a burial place where pious Christians will continuously pray for his salvation. Even more gravely, the abbot offers him complete clemency:

Dracula has asked the abbot several times in confessions whether he, the holy man, thinks every sinner will be admitted to paradise if he truly repents. The abbot is particularly concerned that his patron be given the last rites, when the moment comes, although he is afraid to tell him so. At the abbot's gentle insistence, however, Dracula has had himself rebaptized in the true faith to show his repentance for his temporary conversion to the heretical Western church. The abbot has forgiven him everything, privately – everything. Has not Dracula devoted his life to holding back the **infidels**, the monstrous sultan who is battering down all the walls of Christendom? (Kostova 2005:701) [My emphasis]

The battle against the 'infidels' has not yet ended, it has just begun. The ending of the novel signifies such an idea with the vampire's pensive stance in a leader's posture behind his army set out to fight the real evil of the whole Western world. The job has yet to be planned as he looks ahead of him towards the entire world planning his next move undaunted by any fear of mortality. The fact that one of his successors, the protagonist, is still alive is another indication that the story is far from reaching its end:

The dome of the tower has long openings on every side. When the abbot reaches the top, Dracula is already standing at his favorite post, staring across the water, his hand clasped behind him in a characteristic gesture of thought, of planning. The abbot has seen him stand this way in front of his warriors, directing the strategy for the next day's raid. He looks not at all like a man in constant peril – a leader whose death could occur at any hour, who should be pondering every moment the question of his salvation. He looks instead, the abbot thinks, as if all the world is before him (ibid.).

The new Da Vinci Code, the historian code:

Searching history to decode a series of symbols, maps, letters, and cryptograms to find a crucial controversial truth had been undertaken by another top selling novel, the *Da Vinci Code* (Brown 2003). The similarities between these two works other than their ability to show contemporary readers' phenomenal interests in history, is no better articulated than in the above mentioned alternative titles given by reviewers to *The Historian: The New Da Vinci Code, The Historian Code*. And indeed we eagerly await the production of *The Historian* (2005) into a movie to see how the director manages to deal with the main issues discussed in this paper.

In both novels, academics are involved in carrying the burden of a controversial truth reaching into the heart of religious belief and orthodoxy. Moreover, in both novels, a motherless female protagonist undertakes a pursuit to find that she, herself, is a descendant of the very person being explored. The findings of each protagonist, however, entail a number of controversial alternative theories. In *The Historian* (2005) one of these theories is associated with man's age-old desires to find an elixir of life to outwit death. Another controversial issue discussed in *The Historian* (2005) is the ability of Good to coexist with Evil under the notion of fighting another greater evil. This greater evil comes in the form of a Muslim expansion threatening to wipe Western civilization, which is symbolized by the icon of a dragon slaying the 'infidel' as this paper in its final part will show.

Moreover, in both works secret orders were assembled to protect and allow the legacy of a historical truth to survive. In his pursuit to avenge the cruelty of the Ottomans, the vampire assembled a secret Order of Dragons composed of Christian monks whose secret mission was to counter attack the Crescent Guard of the Sultan and then relocate the vampire's severed body to perform a long secretive practice to recover his life. This ancient practice of vampirism was perfected by some monks who learnt it from the ancients:

Oh, the legend goes back at least to Egypt, dear colleagues. But here in Istanbul – to begin with there is a story that the most bloodthirsty of the emperors of Byzantium were Vampires, that some of them understood the Christian communion as an invitation to quaff the blood of mortals. But I do not believe this. I believe it appeared later (Kostova 2005:214).

The Turkish scholar refuses to believe it, but the words of the vampire sheds all doubt about the practice being perfected by a secret group of Latin monks as the following conversation between Dracula and the abbot negotiating the construction of his own 'alternative' crossless grave demonstrates:

"No cross," the prince says firmly. He looks the abbot does not dare to ask more. But he is this man's spiritual adviser, and after another moment he speaks up. "Every grave is marked with the suffering of our Savior, and yours must have the same honor."

Dracula's face darkens. "I don't plan to subject myself long to death," he says in a low voice.

"There is only one way in which to escape death," the abbot says bravely, "and that is through the Redeemer, if He grants us His grace."

Dracula stares at him for a few and the abbot tries not to look away. "Perhaps," he says finally. "But recently I met a man, a merchant who has traveled to a monastery in the West. He said there is a place in Gaul, the oldest church in their part of the world, where some of the Latin monks have outwitted death by secret means. He offered to sell me their secrets, which he has inscribed in a book."

The abbot shudders. "God preserve us from such heresies," he says hastily. "I am certain my son, that you refused this temptation."

Dracula smiles. "You know I am fond of books."

"There is only one true Book, and that is the one we must love with all our hearts and all our souls," the abbot says, but at the same moment he is unable to take his eyes off the prince's scarred hand and the inlaid hilt with which it plays. Dracula wears a ring on his little finger; the abbot well knows, without looking closer, the ferociously curling symbol on it.

"Come." To the abbot's relief, Dracula has apparently tired of this debate, and he stands up suddenly, vigorously. "I want to see your scribes. I will have a special job for them soon."

They go together into the tiny scriptorium, where three of the monks sit copying a page of the life of Saint Anthony. The press itself stands in one corner. It is the first printing press in Wallachia, and Dracula runs a proud hand over it, a heavy, square hand. The oldest of the scriptorium monks stands at a table near the press, chiseling a block of wood. Dracula leans over it. "And what will this be Father?"

Saint Mikhail slaying the dragon, Excellency," the old monk murmurs. The eyes he raises are cloudy, occluded by sagging white brows.

"Rather have the Dragon slaying the infidel," Dracula says chuckling.

"I have a special commission for you," Dracula tells him. "I shall leave a sketch for it with the lord abbot."

In the sunshine of the courtyard, he pauses. I will stay for the service, and take communion with you." He turns a smile on the abbot. "Do you have a bed for me in one of the cells tonight?"

"As always, my Lord. This house of God is your home" (Kostova 2005:703-04).

Here the novel comes full circle offering an explanation to the ambiguous riddles that the reader encounters as the main characters tried to unravel this so-called hidden truth. The quotation explains the existence of blank books with woodcuts of dragons that have been sent by the vampire's librarians and secret Order of Dragons to Western scholars, academics and historians. These books with secret prescriptions to outwit death remain blank, as their owners and readers have not yet earned the right to decode them. The alternative to death is encoded in the emblem of a dragon engraved in a blank book. The burden of such a truth is laid on the protagonist, the surviving descendant who like the vampire, is a historian herself and should uncover the secret.

The alternative almost heretical views of Dracula may be permissible through the disguise of fantastic literature which as Eric Rabkin (1976:4) stated in *The Fantastic in Literature*, 'does more than extend experience; the fantastic contradicts perspectives'. Contradicting the abbot's perspective on mortality and offering a subversive alternative existence to death is the vampire's ability to metamorphose. The vampire, we are told, can change into different animate and inanimate forms, becoming a bat, wolf, animal and fog, thus transgressing physicality and time. This is one of the subversive roles of fantasy and a pull towards entropy, a level of undifferentiation and non-being. Fantasy allows the author and his/her readers to enter a 'perilous realm' to confront the unseen and the unsaid of culture (Jackson 1988:4). Fantasy, especially metamorphosis, according to Swinfen (1984:12) offers the author the chance to test and explore reality from an alternative perspective other than human. The vampire,

the undead, offers the author the chance to explore the age old curiosity about defying death and living eternally without having to conform to religious orthodoxy.

The dragon in the aftermath of 9/11:

As I mentioned earlier, the *Da Vinci Code* (2003) and *The Historian* (2005) betray a contemporary interest in reviving ancient stories that are tied with alternative religious themes. An extensive comparison of both novels is the main subject of my forthcoming paper. However, what is striking about these two works is that they both invest in some sort of conspiracy story to conceal a long held truth compromised by a long series of cover ups. In *The Historian* (2005), Paul and Helen need to go into the heart of the Eastern Bloc to decode local folktales and ageless oral lyrics and manage to locate the burial place of the vampire. What is subversive about their findings is related to the icon of a dragon slaying the infidels. Moreover, in the depth of Europe a local practice takes this subverted message a step further. The icon of the dragon, the symbol of evil since the fall of Adam and Eve from Paradise, is united with the icon of a saint in a purgatorial dance of rebirth. Good and evil amalgamate in one major quest to absolve a more horrifying malevolence that threatens the modern world – the threat from the East. The ‘infidels’ are to be obliterated through the unifying efforts of Saint and Dragon.

The uncovering of long lost truths may help the modern biased mind to negotiate its own political and cultural anxieties. Topping such anxieties is the fear of terrorism and national security which have ‘overshadowed every other issue’ (Winkler 2005:43). Winkler goes on to find parallels between post 9/11 and the Cold War:

Fears following September 11, 2001, for example, parallel those of the Cold War. After September 11, Johnson writes, "Americans, the most optimistic of people, now faced unnerving official terror warnings.... Their television screens broadcasted alerts. Their newspapers published emergency preparedness articles full of alarming instructions on how to protect themselves from biological, chemical or radiological attacks. Their government authorities, already vastly expanding the surveillance and interrogation of citizens suspected of being security risks, advised them to be on the lookout for terrorists." Fifty-five years earlier America had been gripped by similar

fears: fear of a cold war turning hot; fear of a Soviet Union that had detonated an atomic bomb, ending the U.S. monopoly on nuclear weapons; fear of traitors within who were stealing the fruits of victory. Civil defense shelters blossomed in American cities. Children were taught how to crouch under classroom desks, as if that would stave off the effects of nuclear attacks (Ibid.).

Cultural anxiety towards the other seems to erupt every now and then in the course of history. Whether referred to as Ottoman barbarism, the Cold War or Islamic terrorism, they all signify a mistrust and antagonism towards the other. *The Historian* (2005) exemplifies how fantasy manages to voice such anxieties in an effort to try to make sense of them and, more importantly, overcome them.

Indeed, the last chapter of the novel, from which the last excerpt on the vampire is taken, comes directly after a contemporary scene in which the protagonist refers to the wreckage of a federal building bombed by terrorists:

In my hotel room, I set my book on the glass-topped table and washed my face and hands. Then I went to the windows and stood looking out the city. Down the block I could see the patrician ugliness of Philadelphia City Hall, with its statue of peace-loving William Penn balanced on top. From here the parks were green squares of treetops. Light glanced off the bank towers. Far to my left I could see the federal building that had been bombed the month before, the red-and-yellow cranes grappling with the debris in its centre, and could hear the roar of rebuilding.

But it was not this scene that filled my gaze. I was thinking, in spite of myself, of another one, which I seemed to have watched before. I leaned against the window, feeling the summer sun, feeling oddly safe despite my great height from the ground, as if unsafety lay for me in a completely different realm (Kostova 2005:700).

The passage shows the blending of stark reality defined by the ugliness of the building with the clearing of rubble in the background, and the luring perilous realm of fantasy in the figure of the vampire. Fantasy especially in the post 9/11 era, opens up a space for authors to negotiate and make sense of what they cannot state directly. The dreary contemporary surroundings with an intentional 'toning down' of the terrible terrorist bombing of the

Federal Building, shows the unconscious need to leave the fragile sense of safety in reality to the paradoxical perilous world of fantasy. American vulnerability and post 9/11 cultural anxieties are reflected in the protagonist's subconscious need to understand and negotiate her reality at this final moment in the novel, which can only be sustained by paradoxically finding refuge in the fearful vampirish figure of Dracula, who has adopted the vocation of saving the West from the terrors of the East.

In the aftermath of the events of 9/11, the sacking of the heart of the great city New York, writers find themselves going to the East to read their history and religions. An amazing surge in the number of books sold on the Middle East, its history and religions, especially Islam, betrays the need of Western minds to make sense of what really happened on that evil day. Cowley (2004) and Tyler (2006:268) find traces of post 9/11 American cultural anxiety in the popular success of works like the *Da Vinci Code* (2003), 'which reflect a return "back to basics" about religion and values, and anxiety about secret societies, such as Al Qaida and its radical violent fundamentalist agenda'.

This paranoia extends in the case of *The Historian* (2005) to an examination of the origins of the superstitious stories of the vampire and its secret order of dragons in the depths of history which resonates with answers and alternative interpretations, one of which this paper has put forward in its very title. The invasion of Baghdad the most ancient of great cities, and even more recently the contemporary attack and invasion of Lebanon under the motto of 'war on terror' are yet instances resonating with the sacking of Constantinople. One of the many ways of decoding the real reasons behind such evil moments takes us back to the old conflict, 'the age old conflict between an Islamic East and a Judeo-Christian West' (Kostova 2005:viii). Whether on the Eastern or Western side of this conflict it remains certain that the literary genre of the fantastic, instead of allowing us an escape from our contemporary anxieties, compels us to restate our moral and political grounds. In the case of *The Historian* (2005), the West with all its icons of Good and Evil (in the person of the Saint and the vampire) unite in the urgent need to purge the Muslim 'infidel' East of its evil ancient Ottoman ambitions to expand westward. The protagonist's father's thoughts on history,

pursued in academic as well as fictional books, are very adequate to conclude this paper:

It is my belief that the study of history should be our preparation for understanding the present, rather than an escape from it (ibid.:335).

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