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Vampires as Creatures of the Imagination

Theories of Body, Soul and Imagination in Early Modern Vampire Tracts (1659-1755)

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Introduction

In the summer of 2006, Matteo Borrini, a forensic anthropologist from the University of Florence, found the remains of a female ‘vampire’. The skeleton was found in a mass grave from the plague of 1576, on Lazzaretto Nuovo, a sanatorium for plague sufferers northeast of Venice. The woman could be identified as a vampire because she had been buried with a brick jammed between her teeth, to prevent her from preying on the survivors.¹ ‘Vampires’ from the late sixteenth century did not suck blood, but they were hungry. It was believed that some corpses masticated in their graves, that they ate their shroud and sometimes even their own limbs. The effects of this mastication were not confined to the tomb, however. These ‘masticating bodies’ were believed to be the origin of pestilent diseases that struck villages and cities. To stop this mastication, villagers put earth and sometimes stones in the mouth of the dead body.²

¹ The main facts of the discovery were presented by Matteo Borrini at the reunion of the Italian Anthropological and Ethnological Society, 22 May 2008 as ‘La scoperta di una sepoltura di “vampiro”: archeologia e antropologia forense analizzano la genesi di una leggenda’. A summary of this presentation is published as part of ‘Rendiconti della Società Italiana di Antropologia ed Etnologia’, *Archivio per l’Antropologia e l’Etnologia*, 138 (2008), 215-217.

² This can be seen, for instance in two texts that we will study in detail later: Marigner, ‘Sur les Stryges de Russie’, *Mercur Galant*, February 1694, p. 103 and Michael Ranft, *De Masticatione mortuorum in tumulus Liber Singularis: Exhibens Duas Exccercitationes, Quarum Prior Historico-critica Posterior Philosophica est* (Leipzig, 1728), II (*Dissertatio Posterior Philosophica*), § 56-59: ‘Haec enim glebam terrae recens effossae sub sepeliendorum cadaverum mentis ponit, quo se vetuisse cadaverum masticationem & quicquid in sui perniciem inde sequatur.’

In the first section of this article, I will show that stories about masticating corpses were related to the first vampire stories, which appeared in the middle of the seventeenth century. Contemporaries understood the effects of both masticating corpses and vampires in terms of the imagination. The core of the article will be about the diverse ways in which the powers of the imagination were evoked as an explanatory category for understanding the phenomenon of vampirism. In the seventeenth century, physicians and theologians did not dismiss vampirism as mere illusionary. Some scholars believed that vampires did not really exist, but they admitted that the overheated imagination of the alleged victims could have very real effects. These victims imagined that members of their family came back from the dead to prey on them, and this imagination could be so strong that many died as a result. Other scholars believed in vampires in the sense that they considered the pernicious action that cadavers could exert on the living to be very real. They argued that the imagination of the corpse, still active because of the continuing operation of the vital powers, sent out noxious vapours or even a semi-corporeal avatar that could kill specific surviving relatives. In both cases, the death of the victims of vampirism was interpreted as the very real result of the powers of the imagination, of the victim or of the vampire-corpse respectively. It was only in the middle of the eighteenth century, as I will show, that the perception of vampirism shifted from a ‘disease of the imagination’ to an ‘imaginary disease’.

[FIGURE 1 HERE]

When gravediggers reopened mass graves to add newly deceased victims of pestilence, they would sometimes come across bodies bloated by fermented blood and gasses, with hair and nails grown, and blood seeping from their mouths. They were struck by the fresh complexion and the appearance of life these corpses gave. Some people believed that these corpses could leave their graves and pester their family and friends. In an account recorded by Martin

Weinrich, a sixteenth-century Silesian physician and philosopher, a shoemaker who had died in Breslau in 1591 came back from the grave as a semi-corporeal ghost and terrified the sleeping with horrible visions. He delivered pinches and blows to his kin and tried to suffocate them, so that blue marks and the impression of his fingers would be visible on his victims' bodies.³ These curious stories are easily relegated to folkloristic history. Early modern scholars took these stories seriously, however, and elaborated theoretical systems to make sense of them. Revenants and vampires presented a challenge to early modern philosophers and physicians and their hypothetical explanations illuminate their theoretical allegiances. Living dead, masticating cadavers with evil powers, corpses that could get out of their graves without disturbing the tomb or soil: such phenomena challenged their preconceptions and beliefs.

The Cambridge Neo-Platonist Henry More, for instance, used the story of the shoemaker from Breslau as proof for an immortal soul and as a test case for his metaphysical system. Similarly, the first authors writing about blood-sucking vampires were confronted with hard metaphysical and medical questions. They had to find solutions for problems related to the connection between spirit and matter and the borderline between life and death. They were also confronted with practical questions about diseases, contagious vampirism and the efficacy of proposed remedies. Vampires were border phenomena and they allow us to highlight the boundaries of these scholars' conceptual structures, and the frontiers of their thinking. In this paper, I will study some unknown and neglected texts from the time that the vampire was introduced to Western Europe. I will show that vampires were an Eastern European phenomenon, arising where cultures mixed, at the crossroads of Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant beliefs, at the shifting borders of the great Central European and Ottoman empires in a time of regional political and religious upheaval. Liminal creatures from the East, they came to haunt the Western imagination.

³ The story became widely publicized when it was put in the preface to the 1612 edition of Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola's *Strix* or *De ludificatione Daemonum* (1523) by Weinrich's brother Charles.

From these early theoretical tracts written in France and later in the Holy Roman Empire, it becomes clear that early modern vampirism was considered to be a disease of the imagination. The ambiguous imagination served these theorists to negotiate and bridge the boundaries between body and soul, the corporeal and the spiritual and life and death. But the imagination was used in many different ways by these authors, enabling us to offer a striking cross-section of early modern conceptions of diseases of the imagination.

What were early modern ‘vampires’?

Many believe that vampires were invented by Bram Stoker, or were at least a figment of John Polidori’s imagination.⁴ Historical sources show that vampires were first mentioned in the early modern period, however. How exactly do these early modern vampires resemble the vampires of popular culture today? Can these early modern vampires be ‘vampires’ if they do not even suck blood? The correct definition of a vampire is a heated topic in scholarly vampirology. Recently, David Keyworth has argued (inspired by the eighteenth century Benedict monk and vampire authority Dom Augustin Calmet) that ‘the vampire *per se* can be defined as an undead-corpse with an insatiable thirst for blood.’⁵ Keyworth therefore refuses to use the term ‘vampire’ for masticating corpses and late sixteenth-century revenants, which were only semi-corporeal and did not suck blood.

Keyworth’s distinction is somewhat crude and gratuitous, however. As he himself shows, the early modern and Enlightenment vampire was a creature akin to many others in ancient,

⁴ John Polidori, *The Vampyre; A Tale* (London: Sherwood, Neely and Jones, 1819); Bram Stoker, *Dracula* (Westminster: Archibald Constable, 1897).

⁵ David Keyworth, *Troublesome Corpses. Vampires & Revenants from Antiquity to the Present* (Southend-on-Sea: Desert Island Books, 2007), p. 56. For a similar argument, see also his ‘Was the Vampire of the Eighteenth Century a Unique Type of Undead-corpse?’, *Folklore* 117 (December 2006), 241-260. For a good reference work on early modern vampirism, see Klaus Hamberger, *Mortuus non mordet: kommentierte Dokumente zum Vampirismus 1689-1791* (Wien: Turia und Kant, 1992). Relevant also is Jean-Claude Aguerre, ‘La Naissance du vampire au XVIIIe siècle: en quoi l’évolution de la pensée au XVIIIe siècle a-t-elle permis l’apparition d’un mythe comme celui du vampire’ (Thèse de Diplôme d’études supérieures spécialisées (DESS), Institut polytechnique de philosophie, Université Paris 8, 1981)

medieval and early modern literature, historiography and folklore. It resembles the Greek *lamiae*, shape-changing creatures that fell in love with young men and fed on their blood and flesh. It is akin to the malevolent wandering corpses from twelfth century Anglo-Saxon accounts, to the reanimated corpses from thirteenth-century Scandinavian sagas, and to the seventeenth-century Greek *vrykolakas*, uncorrupted corpses to which all kinds of malevolent influences were ascribed. According to early modern belief, demons were also able to move corpses and make them harass the living.⁶ Furthermore, I will show that there is a continuity, not merely a similarity, between vampire stories, stories of masticating corpses and stories of the dead coming back in a semi-corporeal way like the shoemaker from Breslau. This shows that the ‘vampire’ cannot be isolated from these other creatures by artificial definitions.

Another approach to the question is to look where the word ‘vampire’ comes from and how it was used by contemporaries. The first use of the word in Western Europe that I have found is the introduction of the Polish variant of ‘vampire’: *Upior* or *Upyr*. This term appears in a letter from Pierre Des Noyers, secretary of Marie Louise de Gonzague, a French princess who became Queen of Poland from 1645 till 1667. This French-Polish connection would help to introduce vampires to Western Europe. Des Noyers wrote from Danzig to his friend Ismael Bouillaud in France on 13 December 1659. In the letter, Des Noyers describes vampirism (without mentioning the sucking of blood) and refers to the ‘Ukrainian’ term *Upior*.

Katharina Wilson affirms that the most accepted etymological theory traces the word ‘vampire’ to Slavic origins, probably to the Bulgarian word *Upir*.⁷ Notwithstanding references to Western European revenants and undead corpses from before and after the 1650s, it is better historiographical practice to reserve the term ‘vampire’ in early modern historiography for the revenants that belong to the lineage of early modern Slavic *Upior*, conforming to the usage of

⁶ See for e.g. Martin Del Rio, *Disquisitionum magicarum libri sex* (Louvain, 1599-1600). For more on demonology, see Stuart Clark, *Thinking with Demons: The Idea of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

⁷ Katharina M. Wilson, ‘The History of the Word “Vampire”’, *Journal of the History of Ideas* 46:4 (Oct. - Dec. 1985), 577-583. Wilson seems to believe (mistakenly) that the term ‘vampire’ was first used in France in a 1693 article in the *Mercurie Galant*. In fact, in that article, the Polish term *Upierz* is used.

contemporaries when the term was first introduced in Western Europe.⁸ The meaning of the word ‘vampire’ could then change according to modifications in its characterization in early modern and Enlightenment reports and books. Vampires could be considered shroud-eating or blood-sucking, more or less corporeal, depending on the period and the specific author.

It should be stressed, however, that it does not make sense to draw too definite boundaries. Early modern authors were aware of classical precedents of similar creatures when they first heard about vampires, yet they usually maintained a distinction between them. Often, the *Strix*, a witch or blood-sucking bird from Classical literature, is referred to in early modern sources.⁹ Similarly, Michael Ranft refers to many earlier sources related to the mastication of the dead and relates them to vampirism.¹⁰ Zedler and Voltaire refer vampire beliefs to the superstitions of the Orthodox Church and see their origins in early modern Greece.¹¹ If the first reports of vampires reached Western Europe in 1659, vampires became publicized for the first time only in 1693. Vampirism was still very much an unknown in the West, and some authors soon ventured to give an explanation of the phenomenon. It was only around 1725 that vampires became widely known and discussed, with the vampire craze of the 1730s as a high point.

The introduction of the vampire to the West

⁸ This conforms to the preference to use actor’s categories in historiography. In this way, it is also possible to include an element of ‘strangeness’ of the East for Western-European readers that is not captured in definitions that seek to define the ‘essence’ of the vampire as a ‘blood-sucking corpse’. It is indeed crucial to note that vampires were liminal creatures that appeared in regions where Orthodox, Protestant, Catholic and sometimes even Ottoman cultures mixed.

⁹ Zedler refers to the *Strigoi* and to Hungarian magicians who suck the blood of children. See Johann Heinrich Zedler, ‘Vampyren, oder Blutsauger’, in *Grosses Vollständiges Universallexicon* (Leipzig/Halle, 1731-1754), vol. 46, pp. 474-82. For lack of a better term, Des Noyers (*Mercure Galant*, May 1693, p. 63) writes that vampires are called *Striges* in Latin. Marigner (‘Sur les Stryges’) writes that people compare vampires to the carnivorous nocturnal birds called *Strix* (*Striges*) in Latin. See Samuel Grant Oliphant, ‘The Story of the Strix: Ancient’, *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association* 44 (1913), pp. 133 ff. for more on the ancient *Strix*.

¹⁰ Ranft, *De Masticatione*, I (*Dissertatio Prior Historico-critica*), §11.

¹¹ Zedler, ‘Vampyren, oder Blutsauger’; Voltaire, ‘Vampires’, in *Œuvres complètes de Voltaire* (Gotha, 1786), vol. 43, pp. 386-392.

In 1693, a series of strange phenomena caused a commotion in Paris. The curious prophecies of the *Camisards* had hardly been dissipated by Royal forces, or reports that a diviner from Lyons could find criminals with a divining rod caused a new stir.¹² In the Parisian journals, interspersed between reports of this diviner, we can find the first publicized accounts of vampires in Western Europe. In this section, I will detail the context of the first reception of vampire stories in the West.

It has never been noted, but dead bodies that suck blood were mentioned for the first time in print in France in *La Baguette Justifiée*, a treatise on the divining rod published in the *Mercurie Galant* of March 1693, and republished as a separate volume later in the same year.¹³ The author, Claude Comiers, had studied theology and was canon at the cathedral of Embrun as well as professor of mathematics at Paris. He was known as a controversialist and as a Cartesian-minded philosopher with an interest in the occult. He was employed for some time at the *Journal des Savans* and wrote numerous articles on topics in natural philosophy and medicine for the *Journal des Savans* and for the *Mercurie Galant*. Struck with blindness in 1690, he became priest at the Hôpital Royal des Quinze-Vingts in Paris and took on the title *Aveugle-Royal*.¹⁴

In his tract, Comiers asserts that he wants to explain the action of the divining rod in a natural way, by referring to the exhalations of water and metals. When he tries to explain that the divining rod can track down murderers, however, he asserts that the souls of the victims played a central role. God had permitted these souls to stay with their bodies, waiting for an occasion to

¹² For the Camisard case and the divining rod case, see Koen Vermeir, ‘The “Physical Prophet” and the Powers of the Imagination. Part I. A case-study on prophecy, vapours and the imagination (1685-1710)’, *Studies in the History and Philosophy of the Biological & Biomedical Sciences*, 35C:4 (2004), 561-591 and id., ‘The “Physical Prophet” and the Powers of the Imagination. Part II. A case-study on dowsing and the naturalization of the moral (1685-1710)’, *Studies in the History and Philosophy of the Biological & Biomedical Sciences*, 36C:1 (2005), 1-24.

¹³ The first mention in personal correspondence that I have found is from 1659 (cf. *infra*). Wilson (‘The History of the Word “Vampire”’) only refers to an article of May 1693, which is explicitly dedicated to vampirism. On p. 579, Wilson asserts that also in 1693, a Polish clergyman asked the Sorbonne how one should deal with corpses believed to be vampires. This claim is not substantiated by the sources she cites, however, and I have not been able to find a reliable source for this assertion. The first printed works in which blood-sucking vampires are mentioned are probably Johann Weichard von Valvasor, *Die Ehre deß Herzogthums Crain* (Nüremberg, 1689), a historical-geographical work on Carniola, what is today a large part of present-day Slovenia, Istria and surrounding regions; and in a book by Valvasor’s collaborator Erasmus Francisci, *Der Höllische Proteus* (Nüremberg, 1690).

¹⁴ See Louis Moreri, *Le Grand Dictionnaire Historique* (Paris, 1759), part 3 (C-COM), p. 860. Monique Vincent, ‘Un Philosophe du XVIIIe Siècle, Le Père Comiers “Savant Universel”’, *XVIIIe Siècle* 169 (Oct./Déc. 1990), 473-80. Joachim Von Zur Gathen, ‘Claude Comiers: the first arithmetical cryptography’, *Cryptologia* XXVII: 4 (2003), 339-49.

expose the criminals and take revenge. When the diviner entered the place where the corpses of the victims had been found, these wandering souls entered the pineal gland of the diviner's brain, Comiers argued, setting the diviner's nerves and animal spirits into motion, causing heart spasms and making the divining rod turn. It is these souls, according to Comiers, that put the diviner and his rod on the track of the criminals, so that he could follow them. For Comiers, it was clear that the divining rod could not be diabolical, because the devil would never bring criminals and murderers to justice. Only a physical explanation is appropriate.¹⁵

Pierre Le Brun, one of the main adversaries of Comiers, did not agree and he argued forcefully that the working of the divining rod could only be due to demonic involvement. Le Brun had the support of many clerical authorities and prominent figures such as the philosopher Malebranche and Cardinal Camus.¹⁶ Comiers expressed the hope to prove his critics wrong by giving more physical demonstrations in the sequel of his *Medicine Universelle*. In this book, he promised, he would explain in a natural way various topics related to medicine and occult philosophy, as well as the strange phenomenon of vampirism. Here, Comiers would have been able to elaborate on the similarities between the natural processes behind divination and vampirism. Unfortunately, Comiers died in the fall of 1693 and would never finish this projected work. On vampirism, he indicates that the Polish people had to decapitate the corpses of their family, or at least put a high collar on them so that these corpses could not eat their shroud or suck blood from their kin. Comiers thought that they were able to suck the blood by some kind of sympathy, and this would explain why the corpses had been found with large quantities of fresh blood.¹⁷

The context in which this discussion of vampirism appeared indicates a first attempt at an explanation, albeit unfinished. Comiers suggests strong similarities between vampirism and divining, and from his explanation of the divining rod, we might glean some crucial elements that

¹⁵ Claude Comiers, *La Baguette Justifiée* (Paris, 1693), p. 10-12.

¹⁶ See esp. Pierre Le Brun, *Histoire Critique des Pratiques Superstitieuses* (Paris, 1733) and Vermeer, "The "Physical Prophet" and the Powers of the Imagination. Part II", p. 12.

¹⁷ Comiers, pp. 12-14.

might have been part of his explanation of vampirism. Comiers believes that souls could be permitted or obliged to stay in the vicinity of their dead bodies. These wandering souls can enter the brain of passers-by and affect the imagination (or the nerves and animal spirits), in this way disturbing the bodies of the victims and creating curious effects. This explanatory model offers an interesting template to understand vampirism. This naturalist approach, defended by Comiers but opposed by Le Brun, can also be found in the vampire debates, and the same tensions between natural and demonic explanations are present.

Two months later, in May 1693, we find an eyewitness account of the Polish vampire craze published in the *Mercure Galant*.¹⁸ This account was written by Pierre des Noyers, former secretary of the Queen of Poland during the ‘deluge’ of Poland, the time when Poland was overrun by foreign forces. Des Noyers was a curious character. Correspondent of Pascal and Mersenne on the problem of the void and a good friend of the astronomer Hevelius, he was fascinated by astrology, alchemy and other occult arts. He maintained correspondence with like-minded savants, including Rosicrucians, and he visited many of them on his travels between Poland and France.¹⁹ Like Comiers, Des Noyers died in 1693, so he would never see the responses to his article in the *Mercure*.

Des Noyers writes that in Poland and Russia there are corpses filled with blood, called *Striges* in Latin and *Upierz* in the local tongue. He mentions that these dead bodies eat their shrouds, but he stresses in particular that they suck blood. Local people believe that a Demon leaves the corpse between noon and midnight and harasses the kin and acquaintances of the deceased person. The Demon crushes them, presents them with the image of the deceased person and sucks their blood. It then carries back the blood and collects it in the corpse, often in such quantities that it flows through all the orifices of the dead body. The victims become weaker and weaker until they die, and the demon does not stop until the whole family has been wiped out. The local remedy is to behead the suspect corpse, to open its heart and let flow the

¹⁸ Pierre Des Noyers in *Mercure Galant*, May 1693, pp. 62-69.

¹⁹ François Secret, ‘Astrologie et Alchimie au XVIIe siècle’, *Studi Francesi* (nuova serie) 60 (1976), 463-79.

large quantities of blood. To protect themselves, the villagers collect the blood, mingle it with flour, knead the dough and make bread from it. The victims eat this bread in order to save them from such a terrible vexation.²⁰

It is elucidating to compare this account with a letter Des Noyers wrote from Danzig to his friend, the mathematician, astronomer and astrologer Ismael Bouillaud, thirty-four years earlier, on 13 December 1659. At that time, Des Noyers writes about a ‘Ukrainian illness’ called *Upior* or *Friga*, which would seem fabulous if it were not attested by many credible and honourable persons. When a person who was born with teeth dies, he will eat in his coffin his shroud and later his hands and arms. Simultaneously, the members of his family die one after another. Once it became clear that people are dying from this disease, they disinter the corpse of the first one who died, and if it turns out that it has eaten its shroud and limbs, they behead it. The blood that flows from the corpse is clear as if from a living person.²¹ The differences between these two accounts are striking: the location has changed from Ukraine to Poland and Russia and a natural disease has been transformed into a demonic phenomenon. In these thirty-odd years, the characteristic aspect of the *Upior* or vampire has changed from eating its shroud to sucking the blood of its victims. Furthermore, once people believe that the clear blood of the corpse originally belongs to the victims, the remedy also changes. The blood is restored to the victims in the form of bread for their convalescence and semi-magical protection.

Although Des Noyers was an avid scholar of the occult, a more thorough investigation into the medicine and metaphysics of vampirism would be executed by his friend, Mr. Marigner, Lord of Plessis, Ruel and Billoüard. Little is known of Marigner, apart from the fact that he was a barrister at the High Court of Paris. In the *Mercure Galant* of January and February 1694, he published a dissertation in two instalments, first written as a long letter addressed to Charles de Voland de Materon II, on the ‘creatures of the elements’, vampires and (allegedly) also on the

²⁰ *Mercure Galant*, May 1693, pp. 62-70.

²¹ Lettre CCXXV in *Lettres de Pierre Des Noyers* (B. Behr: Berlin, 1856), pp. 560-64.

divining rod.²² The first part of the dissertation contains a lengthy exposition of a metaphysical system and is called *Sur Les Creatures des Elemens*. The second part of the dissertation, a detailed analysis of the vampire account given by Des Noyers in the *Mercure* of May 1693, is called *Sur les Stryges de Russy*. Marigner had written letters with explanations of vampirism to Des Noyers, but Charles de Voland had pressed him to expound his ideas in a more systematic matter. This correspondence gave rise to the first theoretical discussions of vampires: certainly of vampires as *Upierz* or *Upior*, but also of vampires characterized as dead bodies that in some way or another suck blood.

From the beginning of the eighteenth century, reports of vampires became more and more common. In 1704, the Catholic lawyer Karl Ferdinand de Schertz published *Magia Posthuma* ('posthumous magic') and examines cases of spectres that haunted Moravia. Later, in 1718, a vampire case was reported in Hungary. More importantly, Serbia is taken from the Ottomans and incorporated in the Habsburg Empire at the peace of Passarowitz, bringing subsequent vampire cases under the scrutiny of administrators in Vienna.²³ In 1725, the first well documented vampire case appears, with reverberations all over Europe. The vampire, Peter Poglojowitz of the village Kisilova in current day Serbia, was accused of killing nine villagers. An Austrian judge had to investigate the case and he wrote a report that was taken up by newspapers all over Europe.

Particularly relevant for our account is that the pastor Michael Ranft took this case as the basis of his master's dissertation and later elaborated it in several largely expanded, published editions. In the 1728 edition of his text, Ranft refers to the Polish name *Upiers* and *Upierzycza*, and he quotes a report in which the name *vampyri* is used. He does not treat these vampires as a

²² Not only Comiers, but also Marigner seems to have perceived interesting similarities between the divining rod and vampirism. Unfortunately, there is little to be found on this topic in the text published in the *Mercure Galant*. Charles de Voland de Materon II, Seigneur d'Aubenas Saiignac et Entrepeires was a nobleman from Provence. Second consul of Aix, Procureur du Pais, deputy for the Provençal nobility to the King in 1664 and to Paris in 1671 and 1679, Charles de Voland is said to have been one of the best minds of his age who corresponded with many savants. See Louis Ventre Artefeuil, *Histoire héroïque et universelle de la noblesse de Provence* (Avignon, 1776), pp. 532-33.

²³ Antoine Faivre, 'Du vampire villageois aux discours des clercs (Genèse d'un image à l'aube des Lumières)', in *Colloque de Cerisy. Les Vampires* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1993), 45-74 (p. 48).

separate new species, however, but he sees his work as part of a longer tradition of writings about the ‘mastication of the dead’, and he called his book *De Masticatione mortuorum in tumulis*.²⁴ In this book, he explicitly advocated an explanation of vampirism based on natural magic.

From the above, it has become clear that the first reports of vampirism arrived in Western Europe as part of a network of scholars interested in the occult. These scholars also ventured to give the first explanations of vampirism, based on naturalistic premises but with an eye for the hidden powers of nature. They explicitly opposed what they believed to be common superstitions related to vampirism and they debunked the traditional idea that the devil was involved. Instead, they explained vampirism by elaborating theories of the powers of the imagination. Interestingly, however, later Enlightenment and rationalist writers refused to refer to these theories. Even Calmet, who made the great and renowned compilation of vampire sources in 1746, a book that went through many editions and translations, did not give these authors credit. Their work has disappeared out of sight and it has not yet received serious historical study.²⁵

Antoine Faivre has argued that Enlightenment debates about vampirism were organized around three different types of discourses: rationalist, theological and esoteric. Faivre also characterizes the esoteric discourse as Paracelsian.²⁶ ‘Esoteric’ is a category that does not fit well the late seventeenth-century and the first years of the eighteenth century, however.²⁷ Furthermore, the texts we will discuss cannot be separated from their theological context. Des Noyers’ text refers explicitly to demonic involvement, and Marigner’s analysis draws extensively on Christian imagery and Catholic theological concepts. Although Faivre classifies Marigner’s

²⁴ Michael Ranft, *Dissertatio historico-critica de masticatione mortuorum in tumulis. Oder von dem Kauen und Schmatzen der Todten in Gräbern* (Leipzig, 1725). Michael Ranft, *De Masticatione mortuorum in tumulis. Liber Singularis: Exhibens Duas Excerptationes, Quarum Prior Historico-critica Posterior Philosophica est.* (Leipzig, 1728). Michael Ranft, *Tractat von dem Kauen und Schmatzen der Todten in Gräbern, worin die wahre Beschaffenheit derer Hungarischen Vampyrs und Blut-Sauger gezeigt, auch alle von dieser Materie bißher zum Vorschein gekommene Schrifften recensiret werden* (Leipzig, 1734).

²⁵ Only Antoine Faivre (‘Du vampire villageois’) and Jean-Claude Aguerre (‘La Naissance du vampire’) have looked into the theoretical aspects of Ranft’s work in more detail and cursorily studied the text of Marigner.

²⁶ Faivre, pp. 45-47.

²⁷ The word esotericism (*ésoterisme*) first appears in 1828, and the use of the concept for the early modern period is the centre of scholarly debate. See e.g. Wouter Hanegraaff, ‘The Study of Western Esotericism’, in *New approaches to the study of religion*, ed. by Peter Antes and others (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2004), pp.489-520.

text as ‘esoteric’, angels, the afterlife, limbo and the resurrection of the flesh loom large in his text. Marigner himself attests that the problem is in part natural and in part supernatural. A later text by Michael Ranft is also classified as esoteric by Faivre, although it has distinct rationalist elements. It is clearly and succinctly argued and rejects the mastication of the dead as superstitious. On the other hand, it also draws explicitly on explanations from natural magic.

Faivre’s classification is based on Enlightenment distinctions that do not fit the complexity of the pre- and early Enlightenment. It would be better to distinguish four kinds of discourses, according to the prominence of four different kinds of causes early modern scholars distinguished for explaining wondrous phenomena: God, demons, man and nature.²⁸ No-one argued that vampirism was miraculous, but many saw an uncanny parallel between ghosts, vampires and other revenants on the one hand, and the miraculous resurrection of the flesh at the end of times on the other hand. Although God’s punishment plays an important role in Marigner’s analysis, he explicitly distinguished vampires from the resurrection of the flesh. For Calmet, however, this connection proved to be very troubling, as we will see. A demonic explanation was proposed by the Polish people Des Noyers refers to in his report in the *Mercur*, but also by other authors such as Philipp Rhor.²⁹ More sceptical thinkers explained vampirism as a man-invented phenomenon: these vampire stories were only a figment of the human imagination. This would become the ‘rationalist’ trope later in the course of the Enlightenment.

What characterizes the fourth, ‘natural’ discourse as opposed to the other three is the willingness to see these curious phenomena as real (because, for instance, they are attested by credible people) and a willingness to search, to a large extent, for a natural explanation. Often, to explain curious phenomena, authors would draw on eclectic sources from natural magic and occult philosophy. As we will see, characterising Marigner and Ranft as Paracelsians is not

²⁸ See Vermeir, “The ‘Physical Prophet’ and the Powers of the Imagination. Part I”, p. 566.

²⁹ In his *Dissertatio historico-philosophica de masticatione mortuorum* (Leipzig, 1679), the Leipzig theologian Philipp Rhor argues that masticating corpses were real, but caused by the Devil.

incorrect, although they were often very critical of Paracelsus and drew heavily from other sources as well. It is this discourse that came to the fore in the first explanations of vampirism.

Marigner's Elemental Creatures

In 'Sur Les Stryges de Russie', Marigner examines the possible causes of the 'malady' of vampirism.³⁰ Marigner is disparaging about physicians, because they would like to attribute all kinds of suffering to melancholy only, as if every disease is caused by coarse and malignant vapours coming from the spleen, overheated bile or from the suffocation of the womb. These physicians pretend to treat all illnesses that have the most diverse hidden and extraordinary causes with the same methods. In many cases, they have not succeeded, however, and Marigner gives the example of religious possessions. The debate around the *Camisards* prophets, still prominent in 1693, was highly medicalized, for instance. Physicians tried to attribute the convulsions and strange pronouncements of the prophets to a melancholic disorder of the imagination. In this way, they naturalized prophecy and they undermined the potential for a Protestant revolution in France. At the same time, however, they took away the moral responsibility of the prophets. Therefore, these physicians were not only contradicted by the prophet's followers, but also by Catholic thinkers. First, naturalising prophecy was prone to lead to atheism. Second, Catholic polemicists believed that the curious prophecies should be attributed to the devil. In this way, the prophets could be held responsible for demonic involvement and they could be suppressed.³¹

In the case of prophecy, Marigner argues that medical remedies did not work, and that only exorcisms and the spiritual support of the Church were effective. Similarly, it was clear to him that the effective remedy against vampirism - beheading buried corpses and eating their blood - was not of the order of a natural cure. Such a remedy rather indicated the action of a

³⁰ Marigner, 'Sur Les Stryges', pp. 13-119.

³¹ See Vermeir, 'The "Physical Prophet" and the Powers of the Imagination. Part I', pp. 562-69.

demon or of another kind of malignant spirit. On the other hand, Marigner argued, the withering away of the victims could hardly be ascribed to a possession by a demon. The fact that the victims were invariably cured when the corpse in its grave was beheaded indicated that no demon was involved. Phenomena that worked in a constant and uniform way were considered to be natural, and phenomena that were inconstant or whimsical indicated demonic involvement.³² Furthermore, there seemed to be no practice of exorcisms or other Church rituals. Therefore, Marigner concludes, the phenomenon should be attributed not to a demon but to another kind of spirit. For Marigner, vampirism, like the action of the divining rod, is the result of a curious interaction between the corporeal and the spiritual. This is treated as part of his *Physiex*, which he elaborates in his text on the ‘Creatures des Elemens’.³³

What kind of creature is a vampire? Is it similar to those other strange creatures, such as the ghosts, lemurs, harpies, pythons, oracles, giants, mermaids, evil spirits and werewolves from ancient sources, or to the gnomes, pygmies, nymphs, sylphs, undines, vulcanians or salamanders of Paracelsus? These Paracelsian creatures were a different kind of human, with the figure and qualities of man, even to a more excellent degree, if only without a soul. Marigner wants to counter Paracelsus’ argument by showing that there is only one possible kind of human being, and that there is no place in the cosmos for an infinite variety of strange creatures. In order to do this, he expounds a whole cosmological system with all the orders of being, in which each creature gets an assigned place. This physical and metaphysical system is illuminating, because it explicates the world image in which his notion of a vampire finds its place.³⁴

According to Marigner, the world consists of purely corporeal substances (the elemental elements), purely spiritual substances (angels) and in between a variety of mixed substances that

³² See Koen Vermeir, ‘Divination and the Circulation of Contested Knowledge Claims (1690-1720)’, paper presented at the HSS 2006 Annual Meeting (Vancouver).

³³ Marigner, ‘Creatures des Elemens’ in *Mercur Galant*, January 1694, pp. 58-165.

³⁴ Notably Paracelsus, and more recently Montfaucon de Villars in his *Le comte de Gabalis ou Entretiens sur les sciences occultes* (Paris, 1670), had written about the Elemental Creatures. The possibility that vampires were akin to Kobolds, *Bergmännigen* (gnomes), lemurs etc. was also raised by Ranft, in reference to Rüdiger and Paracelsus. See Ranft, *De Masticatione*, I § 23.

participate in both. These mixed substances consist of spirits that are more or less corporeal, from stones and metals (which have only very coarse spirits), to vegetal and animal spirits (the most subtle spirits). The more subtle the spirits become, the more movements and powers they can acquire, from simple attraction of the metallic spirits to the complex sensitive and imaginative powers of the animal spirits.

Marigner's metaphysics posits three kinds of spiritual creatures: pure spirits (angels), intermediate spirits which are in contact with the corporeal (man) and unfortunate spirits which are subject to what is most gross and coarse in the corporeal realm (demons). This subordination of the demon's spirit to gross matter is the hardest punishment and suffering possible because of the metaphysical opposition between corporeal and spiritual. Marigner's *Physics* is a study of the mixture between the corporeal and the spiritual.³⁵ The mixed substances are divided into three large orders (according to matter, medium and form), each of which consist of four divisions (according to the four elements). In each progressive order, and in each division, the mixture becomes more delicate, subtle and perfect, resulting in the most perfect species, which is man.

[See figure 2]

Marigner's *Physics* allows for 4^3 or 64 species in total, and he claims that there are no more subdivisions possible. From this structure, he deduces that there is no place for different kinds of humans or for curious Paracelsian creatures, and an infinitude of species is certainly impossible.³⁶ Marigner has a lot of respect for Paracelsus, however, whom he calls 'the most

³⁵ The corporeal and the spiritual are mixed to such an extent that there is a continuity between them. This is similar to the work of Henry More, where one can also perceive a tension between metaphysical dualism and gradualism in physiological descriptions. See Vermeir, 'Imagination between Physick and Philosophy', *Intellectual History Review* 18:1 (2008), 119-37.

³⁶ See Marigner, 'Creatures', p. 97: 'au delà desquelles il n'y a plus de division à faire, parce que dans ces trois sortes d'ordres & de divisions, se rencontre le supérieur, l'inférieur & le mitoyen, par rapport aussi aux trois principes de nature, matière, forme, & moyen.' Marigner is inconsistent in this respect, because later in the text (p. 141) he makes further subdivisions into first, second and third species (minor species). Because of this further division of species, Marigner also contradicts himself that there is no space for different kinds of humans. He insists that there can only be one real human species (e.g. p. 102), and he asserts later (after a suspect sum) that there are sixteen human species. If there are many human species after all - even if these are 'minor species' - it is not clear why gnomes and other creatures could not be one of them.

profound physician of his age',³⁷ and he cannot believe that Paracelsus actually believed that these elemental creatures were really kinds of human, or some kind of real extraordinary species. Therefore, he suggests to go beyond the literal level and to look at the spirit in which Paracelsus told these wondrous stories about elemental creatures. He believes that one should interpret Paracelsus at a metaphoric level and he reads alchemical processes and procedures in the curious histories of gnomes, nymphs and Mélusines.³⁸

[FIGURE 2 HERE]

Marigner's cosmology presupposes a strict and divinely instituted order of nature. As a result, strange creatures can only be the product of the imagination: either they are created as figments of a poetic imagination, or they are real but monstrous creatures, born from a mother with a depraved imagination.³⁹ Even in this last case, in which real preternatural creatures upset the order of nature, this assault on order cannot be permanent. Such monsters must be infertile, and cannot generate progeny and their own lineage, because otherwise the order and beauty of the universe, which is created by God according to harmonic proportions, would be perverted - and this is a metaphysical impossibility for Marigner.

There are of course different human individuals, with a striking variety between them, but the point is that they all have the same essence. The variety follows from the different degrees of perfection in which they realize the essence of their species (he calculates from abstract principles that there are 8000 variables to be taken into account). What is also distinctive to man, of course, is his immortal soul (something Paracelsus admits these other creatures do not possess). Because of this soul, man stands above all other corporeal creatures; it is the link between the superior and inferior parts of the created world. After death, man's immortal soul

³⁷ Marigner, 'Creatures', pp. 143-44.

³⁸ Marigner, 'Creatures', pp. 154-163.

³⁹ The idea that the mother's imagination could transform the unborn foetus (imprint images, change its colour, or deform it) has a very long tradition and was somewhat of a trope in early modern Europe. It starts to be challenged around the middle of the seventeenth century, is still widely prevalent until the mid-eighteenth century and it disappears from the medical literature only at the end of the eighteenth century.

can find itself in three different states: in a beatific vision together with the angels, enduring the punishments of hell, or in between these two, suffering the ordeals of limbo.

From accepting Des Noyers' account as true, together with all the above (meta)physical peregrinations, it follows for Marigner that vampires cannot be independent human-like creatures. Vampires can only be either demons or damned souls that are bound to the coarse corporeal world. Because of the strange remedies involved, demonic involvement was already ruled out, and therefore a vampire, just like genii, familiars and kobolds, are identified by Marigner as condemned souls in limbo. They wander certain regions of the earth and take on particular forms, depending on their specific punishment. Vampirism, for Marigner, is a Divine punishment particularly fitting the sins of the coarse and superstitious Polish and Russian population.⁴⁰

Stryges from Russia

Now that the basic nature of vampires is established by means of a (meta)physical classification, the crucial problem for Marigner is to make clear how the spiritual and the corporeal realms interact, so that he can explain the particular phenomena of vampirism. The relation between the corporeal and the spiritual, between body and soul, and between the internal and external senses of man, is central to his (meta)physics and his explanation of vampirism. The layered structure of the cosmos, between more corporeal and more spiritual, between less and more perfect, is mirrored within man himself.

In order to explain vampirism, it is necessary to understand the action of spirit on matter, a conundrum related to the so called mind-body problem. According to Marigner's physics, each power, object and means has to be of a proportionate nature. This implies that for a spiritual power to act on a corporeal object, it has to draw on almost immaterial matter, that is, subtle

⁴⁰This is Marigner's explanation of the geographical specificity of vampirism. See also note 8.

spirits, which it spiritualizes even more. Indeed, the different faculties of man draw on more or less refined spirits to execute their functions, depending on their place in the hierarchy between corporeal and spiritual. The senses are considered more corporeal than the imagination, which in its turn is more corporeal than reason. The spirits employed by these faculties are all coarser than the very subtle spirits that serve man's intellective power.

In Marigner's cosmology, subtle spirits flow between body and soul and between man and environment in a continuous reciprocal flux. Depending on the situation, the soul receives impressions from the senses, processed by the spirits and the imagination, or the soul descends into the various levels of corporeality and emits spirits outside the body to perceive and act on external bodies. By means of spirits and 'species' (or images) moving in and out the body, Marigner explains a number of curious phenomena, such as fascination by the evil eye, mirror images, phantom images, the reception of external images in dreams, and the power of the imagination of the mother on the unborn child.⁴¹

In religious ecstasies, the sensitive, imaginative and rational spirits leave their respective faculties, rendering them inactive. These spirits are absorbed by the intellective faculty and attach themselves immediately to the soul, to aid it in its meditations and purely spiritual operations. There are even ecstasies so extreme and profound that the most gross and crude spirits are obliged to follow the superior spirits, and the soul, drawn to heaven, lifts the body up from the earth and keeps it suspended in the air in a state of levitation. Similarly, with holy people who announce God's Word and preach with a strong fervour and enthusiasm, a luminous circle can be perceived around them. It seems as if their soul is attached to their imaginative and reasonable spirits and accompanies their words all the way to the ears of the auditors.

⁴¹ Marigner, 'Sur les Stryges', pp. 50-72. Marigner elaborates an emission as well as a reception theory of perception. The Platonist emission theory of perception, in which the eyes send out particles or rays which get reflected by the objects in the world (akin to the perception of bats) had been discredited at the end of the sixteenth century in favour of a reception theory of perception. The emission theory retained some popularity with Neo-Platonists and scholars interested in natural and spiritual magic, however. For the history of theories of 'species', see Leen Spruit, *Species Intelligibilis. From Perception to Knowledge*, Brill's Studies in Intellectual History, 48 (Leiden: Brill, 1994). Marigner's theory belongs to a long tradition of the 'powers of the imagination', in which the imagination acts on the external world by emitting vapours. See Vermeir, 'The "Physical Prophet" and the Powers of the Imagination. Part I'.

Marigner solves the problem of the interaction between body and mind by positing a continuity between the corporeal and the spiritual. In this way, he takes a similar approach to other Neo-Platonists such as Henry More.⁴² Marigner writes: ‘In the created corporeal and spiritual things, there cannot be an infinite distance (...) the spiritual ends there where it encounters the most subtle of the corporeal, that is to say, the most perfect and most noble of the corporeal is continuous with the spiritual.’⁴³ The soul is encircled by the most subtle spirits in order to exert its functions. These spirits are so subtle and akin to the soul that they are rendered incorruptible and leave the body to join the soul after death.

Marigner’s theory is inspired by Paracelsus’ *Archeus*, but also by the Neo-Platonist notion of the *astral body*.⁴⁴ According to Henry More, spirits and the souls of the deceased have bodies, only their bodies are more ‘spiritualized’ astral bodies. Their vehicle is akin to our animal spirits, and their soul can act upon it and shape it by their imagination, just as humans send out and direct their animal spirits to move their body: ‘And verily, considering the great power acknowledged in *Imagination* by all Philosophers, nothing would seem more strange, then that these *Aiery* Spirits should not have this command over their own Vehicles, to transform them as they please.’⁴⁵

Marigner explains that there are different degrees of perfection a human being can attain. The less attached to bodily desires and the more spiritual one becomes, the more the corporeal becomes adapted, spiritualized and amenable to the soul. This implies that death is much more painful for base and sinful people, because their soul has to disentangle itself from all its attachments to crude matter. When crude and base habits have corrupted the body to such an extent, it affects the spirituality of the soul and it hinders the proper functioning of the higher

⁴² See Vermeir, ‘Imagination between Physick and Philosophy’. Henry More is a complex case because of a tension between dualism and gradualism in his work.

⁴³ Marigner, ‘Sur les Stryges’, pp. 37-8.

⁴⁴ It was, in particular, the later Neo-Platonists such as Proclus, Iamblichus and Synesius who developed Plotinus’s thought into a mystical philosophy in which the imagination and the astral body played a central role. The astral body enveloped the soul and constituted a connection to the divine. While the corporeal body decayed after death, the astral body remained with the soul.

⁴⁵ Henry More, *The Immortality of the Soul*, in Henry More, *A Collection of Several Philosophical Writings* (London, 1662), p. 168.

functions. This can already be seen in the momentary effect of the gross fumes of wine that corrupt the imagination and envelop and absorb the reasonable and intellective spirits, rendering reason and intellect dysfunctional. A continued base life can cause the higher faculties of man to degenerate and makes him fall below the spiritual level of brute beasts. This coarseness is also reflected in his physiognomy. In this way, Marigner writes, habit really becomes a second nature.⁴⁶

This unhappy situation not only remains during life, it also persists in the afterlife.⁴⁷ The soul of debased people is entangled with the corporeal realm. The envelope of their soul also contains the spirits of the senses and the imagination, being corrupted because of the bad use made of them during life. This envelope does not leave the soul and its crudeness makes the soul earthbound. It makes the soul suffer in a spiritual and transcendent way. According to Marigner, this is the depraved soul's due punishment. This is the predicament of the vampire. For Marigner, the Russians are justly punished for the baseness and sinfulness typical of them. They did not even listen to the French missionaries to give up their superstitions. They still believed, for instance, that their dead bodies had a need for food, and they put earth in their mouth to stop them from eating their shrouds. Marigner ridiculed them for not seeing that this mastication was a natural effect of putrefaction coming from the mouth. The Russians were very coarse people, by their general temperament already subject to the vices of blood and flesh. Their region was ruled by the astrological sign of the Balance, which gave them a nativity characterized by humidity and grossness.

According to Marigner, the Russians' imagination was sorely affected by this gross and abundant humidity, and their blood could not furnish enough warm and dry spirits needed for the higher functions of the soul. They were characterized by a crude imagination, which was

⁴⁶ This might be a reference to Pascal, who writes about the imagination (and the related notion of habit): 'Cette superbe puissance, ennemie de la raison, qui se plaît à la contrôler et à la dominer, pour montrer combien elle peut en toutes choses, a établi dans l'homme une seconde nature.' Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, in *Oeuvres complètes*. (Paris: Seuil, 1963), p. 504.

⁴⁷ Marigner, 'Sur les Stryges', p. 84.

reduced to its most corporeal aspect. Therefore, these people generally were attached to their passions and idolatries, and they were attracted to unclean and base animals. After their death, the souls of these debased Russians were destined to roam the earth to suffer for their sins. Their coarse imagination and the envelope of crude imaginative spirits held back their soul from rising to heaven. Their desire for flesh and blood during their lives made them into vampires after death.

The Russians' unhappy constitution did not destine all of them to the doomed state of vampirism. Marigner explained that people born under positive circumstances could debase themselves by crude behaviour and sin, but people born in unfavourable conditions could improve by the spiritual remedies of the Church. They could leave their crude corporeal nature behind and become more spiritual. If they did not rectify their ways during their lives, they had to atone after death and make their body and soul more spiritual. The souls of vampires were still connected to their dead bodies, and they chose this body as their home to do penance. These souls, wrapped by a kind of astral body, carried the fresh blood that they sucked to this corpse, to keep it flexible and suitable as a dwelling, and to make it less crude and more spiritual. In this way, they could ease the pain and make their crudeness affect less the spirituality of their soul.⁴⁸

Marigner's analysis does not go deeply into the way these vampires suck blood and how they carry it to the grave. This was one of the points of controversy in the vampire debates, however, because it seemed to present a problem related to the vampire's spirituality versus its corporeality. Marigner only writes that the blood cannot have gone to the corpse by itself without being introduced there by an appropriate agent. We might speculate that the soul's

⁴⁸ Marigner, pp. 112-3: 'Il n'y a point d'inconvenient ny d'impossibilité qu'ils choisissent leur cadavre propre, pour y faire l'expiation de leurs fautes, & tâchent à le rendre moins proportionné à la spiritualité de leur ame, pour adoucir leurs peines. Ils peuvent donc pour cela sortir du cadavre où ils font leur retraite, & aller dans la nuit pendant le sommeil, embrasser leurs plus proches Parens, & Amis tres-intimes, leur faire voir leur image, & leur succer le sang jusques à ce que la souffrance les éveille, & qu'à leurs cris l'on vienne à leur secours. Ce sang peut estre porté dans leur cadavre, pour rendre ce domicile moins infect & corrompu...' The debauched corporeal life has corrupted the vampire's body and spirituality in a proportionate way. By carrying on fresh blood, the vampire can clean the corpse and at the same time reduce the heavy corporality and corruption of its spirituality.

envelope can become corporeal enough to suck and carry the blood. Again, Henry More's understanding of the shoemaker from Breslau might be similar to Marigner's analysis of vampires. For More, these spirits could condense their astral bodies so much as to become visible and punch and suffocate the living.⁴⁹

It is striking that Marigner does not interpret the vampires' sucking of their kin's blood as a malignant phenomenon or a dangerous epidemic. When a vampire sucks the blood of someone, it is a warning to his loved ones, permitted by God, that they also lead a debased life and should repent. If these people die and become vampires, it is because of their depraved way of life. If they do not change their life, their debased imagination, a result of their sins, perverted passions and debauched ways, will also keep their soul earthbound and transform them into vampires.

In Marigner's account, vampirism is a disease resulting from a debauched imagination. This disease is as much moral as it is physical. For Marigner, morality and physiology are two sides of the same coin. This holds on the level of physiognomy as well as on the level of the coarseness or subtlety of the spirits that traverse the body and its environment. It is the ambiguity of the imagination, located at the juncture of morality and physiology, that makes this account possible.

Michael Ranft's magical imagination

In *De Masticatione mortuorum in tumulis* (1728), Michael Ranft opts explicitly for a natural philosophical or natural magical explanation of vampirism.⁵⁰ Neither God, nor the devil has anything to do with vampires. Like related phenomena, such as the working of the divining rod,

⁴⁹ Cf. 'But their Bodies being of *diaphanous Aire*, it is impossible for us to see them, unless they will give themselves the trouble of reducing them to a more *terrestrial consistency*, whereby they may reflect light.' More, *Immortality*, p. 161.

⁵⁰ For another magical approach to vampirism, see Christian Friedrich Demelius, *Philosophischer Versuch, ob nicht die merckwürdige Begebenheit derer Blutsauger in Nieder-Ungarn, an 1732 geschehen, aus denen principiis naturae könne erleutert werden* (S.l., 1732).

the bleeding of a corpse when its murderer is near, fascination, the presentiments of animals or prophetic dreams, vampirism should be attributed to hidden powers in nature.⁵¹

Although Ranft's book was presented as a study of the 'mastication of the dead' and was directly inspired by the famous 1725 vampirism case of Peter Poglojowitz in Kisilova, for Ranft the real phenomenon of vampirism was something very particular. Against most popular accounts of vampirism at the time, Ranft dismissed the idea that vampires suck blood as imbecile. Ranft also went to great lengths to explain away the idea of masticating dead bodies by attributing the devoured shroud and hands as well as the chewing sounds coming from the graves to other causes, such as natural putrefaction or rats gnawing at the limbs of the corpses. For Ranft, it is only the deceptive power of the imagination of feeble ladies, or similarly weak persons, overwhelmed by tremors of fear, which causes them to believe that they perceive chewing in tombs, and which makes them attribute it to the dead. Ranft dismisses the masticating of the dead as a human invention, a figment of the imagination.⁵²

The fresh complexion of the corpses in the grave, the growing of hair and nails, the appearance of a new fresh skin, the flowing of the blood and even the erection of the penis of the corpse are all attributed to natural causes, the study of which belongs to ordinary medicine and natural magic. Many of these phenomena can be attributed to the natural vital powers that remain in the body after death. It is even possible, according to Ranft and the many authorities he cites, that new blood is formed and stays in circulation for days, even weeks after death. Even if dead, a cadaver can still have a vegetative life.

These physiological explanations of the bodily complexion of certain corpses Ranft shares with some of his contemporaries. What makes Ranft's work special, however, is that he accepts as true that 'vampires' or so called masticating corpses have a malignant influence on the

⁵¹ Ranft, *De Masticatione*, I, §1, 2 & 7.

⁵² Ibid., I §29: 'Terror enim si pectora occupavit, cerebrum movet, in vanas mentem imagines evocat, multumque inter falsum ac verum mediae caliginis fundit. Quid igitur mirum, si mulier trepidationis plena vel alia huius farinae persona in coemeteriis aliquid sub tumulis pulsare aut stridere percepit, quod tamen nil nisi *kat' eidolon phantasia* fuit?'

living. For him, this is the central issue of vampirism. In order to explain this influence, Ranft draws on his metaphysical and magical theories.

Nature as a whole is characterized by a unique principle: activity. The system of all bodies is itself a unique body in which all parts affect each other continuously by sympathies and antipathies. The atmosphere allows these bodies to act on one another by effluvia, which form a permanent link between them. The flow of these vapours is the foundation of all magical action.⁵³ Ranft has no need to expound a complete theory of magic; he will only refer to the power of the imagination, which has a magical efficacy and at the same time is singularly important for understanding the malignant operation of vampires and masticating death on the living.⁵⁴

Only the strong imagination is able to produce an effect on another body, according to Ranft. The typical example was the force of the imagination of the pregnant women on the child she carries. Ranft gives other examples as well, such as fascinations, bewitchments, and diseases contracted by fear. Even if the practitioners of magic do not really understand how magical aids work. Ranft argues that magical herbs, rituals and cabbalistic signs have no intrinsic power, but all can be effective because they excite and strengthen the magical powers of the imagination of the magical practitioner. Even if demons or angels sometimes affect and excite the imagination, the power of the imagination itself is purely natural.

Some believe with Avicenna that the imagination is so powerful as to be able to strike a horseman from its horse, or to cause storms and earthquakes. According to Ranft, one does not have to believe in such a strong imagination in order to admit that the imagination is powerful enough to make an illness turn for the worse and lead to death. After the brutal death of

⁵³ Ranft, *De Masticatione*, II, § 41: 'Nam cum cuilibet corpori a Natura insita sit perceptio aliqua grati & ingrati, facillime quoque cuiusvis alterius corporis operatio magica, quae fit per effluvia, sentiri & recipi potest. Videmus hinc tam mirabiles in morbis sympatheticis effectus, quia corpora nostra a natura prona sunt ad recipiendum in se, quicquid in magica operatione intenditur.' On the desideratum of a history of vapours, see Vermeir, "The "Physical Prophet" and the Powers of the Imagination. Part I, pp. 580-84.

⁵⁴ Ranft, *De Masticatione*, II, § 44: 'Quod vero imaginatio ad operationes magicas plurimum conferat, vel exinde pater, quod ea sola in alterius corpus possit fieri operatio.'

someone, it is normal that his friends, neighbours and kin are strongly affected. Their conscience, feelings of responsibility and even accusations by others might take its toll. These sad events might affect their spirits and imagination. Stories about death, the afterlife and purgatory might have their effects too. The people close to the deceased might suffer nightmares and even have illusions of the dead coming back to them. They are not themselves anymore, their sadness causes melancholy to take root and nights without sleep weaken them and wear them out. This might in the end cause their own death.

In the early modern period, people also believed that the imagination could generate diseases and particular illnesses, such as madness and hypochondria, but also the plague.⁵⁵ Paracelsus, for instance, sketches the gloomy image of a woman, totally abandoned and without help in a time of the plague, dying in the midst of the pains of childbirth. He thinks that at that moment she might curse the whole of mankind to die with her. But this curse, imprinted on the strong imagination of a dying pregnant woman, might out of itself create a contagion that will doubly poison the living.

According to Ranft, the powers of imagination do not necessarily end after death. Some scholars believed that a corpse would start bleeding, by some kind of natural sympathetic principle, when its murderer came near. But Marci of Kronland writes that the dead body of a young girl started to bleed when someone came near whom the girl had falsely preconceived to be her murderer. At the time of her death, this idea became forcefully imprinted in her imagination. It was therefore not some kind of natural sympathy between the victim and the murderer, but it was the fixation of her still-active imagination that caused her body to bleed post-mortem. This phenomenon demonstrated that the imagination was still active after death.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ See e.g. Friedrich Hoffmann, *Opera omnia physico-medica*, 6 vols (Geneva, 1740-53); and Johann Samuel Carl, *Vom Pest-Engel: oder medicinisches Votum zu denen heutiggen Pest-Consiliis wohlmeynend beygetragen* (Büdingen, 1721). Carl argues that the plague is partly due to fear and superstition. Because of fear, the body loses its composure and this may change its internal contexture. This leaves room for internal putrefaction which causes the plague.

⁵⁶ See Joannes Marcus Marci a Kronland, *Philosophia vetus restituta* (Frankfurt, 1662); and Bohuslav Balbín, *Miscellanea Historica regni Bohemiae*, 6 vols (Prague, 1679-87). Both are mentioned in Ranft.

In a similar way, Ranft argued, the imagination of the vampire Peter Poglojowitz could still be active after death. Furthermore, the imagination did not necessarily have a diffuse action, but a vivid imagination could direct its power to specific individuals. In this way, in only eight days, Poglojowitz might actually have killed these nine particular persons that are attributed to him. Maybe he had had a strong hatred for and had fought with his neighbours so that he would not leave them in peace even after death. The magical power of the imagination, probably by emitting vapours, weakened his victims. It spread a kind of pestilence, directed at specific people, and made them wither away until they died.⁵⁷

The dreadful disease of vampirism, which can kill numerous people, is to be attributed to the strong imagination of a deceased acquaintance. Annihilating the corpse by beheading or burning it will stop the action of its imagination and will end this contagion. But the best way to prevent or end such plagues, according to Ranft, is to reconcile oneself with one's neighbours and to live in peace with them, so one will not be harassed or even taken to the grave by some death acquaintance.

In his explanation of vampirism, Ranft uses different registers of the imagination. First, he explains that weak persons are carried away by their imagination when they imagine chewing sounds coming from the buried corpses in the graveyard. This notion is just a human invention, that is, a figment of the imagination. Second, Ranft does accept the pernicious effects a vampire can have on the living. On the one hand, he explains this by the credulity of the people, who are carried away by fear and guilt after a relative dies. Their imaginations affect their bodies; they become sick and might even die. This is an imagination of the stronger kind, with real physiological effects on the victim's own body. On the other hand, in his explanations, Ranft also has recourse to the strong imagination that has real effects outside the body and soul it

⁵⁷ Ranft argues that the emission of vapours is the central magical action (*De Masticatione*, II, § 40-41) and that the imagination is the quintessential magical power (*De Masticatione*, II, § 43-44). Therefore, although Ranft does not make it very explicit, one can expect that the magical power of the imagination if the vampire works by means of vapours, as in the tradition of the powers of the imagination. (For this tradition, see Vermeir, "The "Physical Prophet" and the Powers of the Imagination. Part I").

belongs to. Here, Ranft introduces a strong imagination, that is still active after death, and that is the real cause of the disease of vampirism.

[FIGURE 3 HERE]

Figments of the imagination in sceptical and theological responses to vampirism

The most famous case of vampirism would take place in 1727, after the death of Arnold Paole, a soldier in Medwegya, Serbia. The case would linger till 1731, when villagers still complained that vampires were terrorising them, and the Austrian authorities started formal investigations. The accounts and documents of this case would be incorporated in a much larger German version of Ranft's book in 1734. But the reverberations of Paole's vampirism evoked so much attention that even the later pope Benedict XIV and the Empress Maria Theresa became involved in the vampire debates. In the course of the eighteenth century, the blood sucking and embodied nature of vampires became more pronounced. Partly as a result of this development, vampire stories became drawn into theological discourses and, at the same time, they were easier to reject by more sceptical authors and later by rationalists.

Sceptics had recourse to a different register of the imagination to explain away most of the phenomena of vampirism. In the *Lettres Juives* of 1738, Boyer d'Argens reflects that it would be easiest to deny totally the truth of these vampire stories, but he admits that this is difficult given the numerous attestations. He proposes to accept that there are many people dying from a curious affliction called 'vampirism', but he ascribes this disease to the power of the imagination of the victims. It is proven by many authors that the imagination of certain sick and susceptible people can cause very strong derangements of the body.⁵⁸ The victims fancy being sucked by

⁵⁸ Jean-Baptiste de Boyer, marquis d'Argens, 'Lettre 137' in *Lettres Juives, ou correspondance philosophique, historique et critique*, 2nd edn (La Haye, 1738); also cited in Dom Augustin Calmet, *Traité sur les apparitions des esprits, et sur les vampires, ou les revenants de Hongrie, de Moravie, &c.* (Paris: Debure, 1751), II, pp. 46-48.

strange creatures and the fear caused by this imagination, being plagued day and night by these imaginary phantoms, affects their body in such a way that it can cost them their lives. The author of an article in the *Glanneur Hollendois* discovers the symptoms of a contagious fanaticism and even an ‘epidemic of the imagination’ in the vampire craze.⁵⁹ Vampirism, for him, is nothing more than the result of a shaken imagination, but this imagination had real effects, and by affecting others’ imagination, these effects could be transmitted to other people, causing a real epidemic.

Even the highest Church officials could follow these arguments of the sceptical camp. The theological stakes were particularly high because vampires and saints were similar in that their corpses were not subject to bodily corruption.⁶⁰ Therefore, it was essential to determine whether vampirism was miraculous, demonic, natural or just fraudulent. In the 1749 edition of his seminal book on beatification and canonization, Prospero Lambertini, archbishop of Bologna and future Pope Benedict XIV discussed vampires.⁶¹ He concluded that the incorruptibility of corpses should be ruled miraculous only after an extremely rigorous consideration of evidence and other possible explanations, because in most cases it could be explained by natural causes. As for vampires, he followed the sceptics and dismissed belief in them as an effect of fear and imagination.⁶²

The Benedictine Dom Augustin Calmet took a more ambiguous stance, however. Viewed from a purely rational perspective, Calmet wrote, he could not believe in vampires. Calmet specifically had problems with the embodied nature of vampires. Some had even claimed that the feet of vampires appeared muddy the day after they showed up among the living. This would suggest not that some kind of semi-spiritual appearance (an astral body or spiritual envelope of

⁵⁹ *Le Glanneur historique*, The Hague, 18 (3 March 1732) and 22 (17 March 1732). Also cited in Calmet, *Traité*, II, pp. 54-59.

⁶⁰ See also Ranft, *De Masticatione*, II §4

⁶¹ Prospero Lambertini, *De servorum Dei beatificatione et de Beatorum canonizatione* (Rome, 1749), Bk IV, Part 1, Ch. 21, pp. 323-24.

⁶² See the excellent study by Fernando Vidal, ‘Extraordinary Bodies and the Physicotheological Imagination’ in *The Faces of Nature in Enlightenment Europe*, ed. by Lorraine Daston and Gianna Pomata (Berlin: Berliner Wissenschafts Verlag, 2003), pp. 61-96.

the soul) harassed the living, but that the corpse itself left the grave. Calmet stated that it was ‘morally impossible’⁶³ for revenants to leave their tomb, especially if it was said that they did so without disturbing the earth of the grave.⁶⁴ These stories Calmet also relegates to the imagination of the living, who wanted to reassure themselves that they had not erred in executing these corpses (desecration and mutilation of corpses was against the law and it was a sin according to Christian doctrine).

As Fernando Vidal has argued, however, it was also the embodied nature of the vampire that made Calmet suspend his *disbelief* in vampires.⁶⁵ Even if he would not believe in vampires after considering them from a purely rational perspective, a religious perspective outdid his rational considerations. These wandering corpses resembled too much the resurrected Christ and the blessed, who will be resurrected with their own bodies at the Last Judgement.⁶⁶ In his 1694 article in the *Mercure Galant*, Marigner had already discussed the resurrection of the body in the context of vampirism. According to Marigner, many phenomena in nature prefigured and embodied the divine truth of the resurrection of the body. Saint Paul had written about the seed that grows into a plant as a metaphor for the resurrection of the body. Marigner mentioned the generation of plants, but also mineral processes and palingenesis. Most strikingly, he described how ‘human phantoms’ could emerge from the blood of corpses. A spirit that remained in the

⁶³ This means: practically impossible (according to human reason and experience, for instance), but not impossible in principle (it could be possible for theological reasons, such as the resurrection of the flesh).

⁶⁴ See Calmet, *Traité*, II, pp. 299-302.

⁶⁵ Vidal, pp. 74-82.

⁶⁶ Gabor Klaniczay has argued that vampires replaced witches in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Eastern Europe. (Gabor Klaniczay, ‘Decline of Witches and Rise of Vampires in 18th Century Hapsburg Monarchy’, *Ethnologica Europea* 17 (1987), 165-180). If vampires retained some of the same social and religious functions, this might partly explain the popular connection between vampires and demonic involvement. For her part, Marie-Hélène Huet argues perceptively that eighteenth-century reports turned the vampire into an inverted image of Christ. ‘The vampire’s public life starts after his death, and, instead of fasting and resisting temptation, he indulges in blood feasts that cannot be stopped until forty days after his life as a vampire has started. Like an inverted image of Christ, the vampire wins disciples who will, in turn make their victims into new converts. Vampirism is not just a plague, it is a false religion. The sacrificial burning of vampires cannot fail to evoke the burning at the stake of heretics and devil worshippers. (...) Reflecting on the likelihood that people can come back after their death to haunt the living, and wondering whether there are resurrections, Calmet comments on the most sacred resurrection, that of Christ. (...) A last unexpected ritual echoes a religious sacrament: the Eucharist. On several occasions, it is suggested that the way to get rid of vampires is to eat them. ‘In Russia,’ notes Calmet, ‘people eat bread mixed with vampire’s blood’ (p. 100). The vampire thus becomes once more the inverted body of Christ, the unlikely Messiah of a troubled post-mortem life, bringing both death and resurrection to his disciples.’ Marie-Hélène Huet, ‘Deadly Fears: Dom Augustin Calmet’s Vampires and the Rule Over Death’, *Eighteenth-Century Life* 21 (1997), 222-32 (pp. 227-28).

corpse in the central heat of the blood could rise in the air and could condense in the cold night, representing the phantom of the deceased as an obscurely luminous body floating above the graveyard. This was a natural and incomplete process, however, which could never be mistaken with the miraculous resurrection of the body at the end of time. It was only a divine sign, placed into nature, which embodied and testified to a religious truth.

The situation was different for Calmet. He also felt the need to find a physical expression of a fundamentally theological fact. Partaking in the tradition of *physicotheology*, and *physica sacra* however, he did not look for divinely instituted signs, but for natural processes that could support and make more credible theological truths in a literal way.⁶⁷ At the same time, he believed that the existence and action of corporeal revenants is one of those phenomena that ‘neither Theology nor Philosophy knows how to explain’.⁶⁸ Vampires were ultimately inexplicable for Calmet because the religious and philosophical approaches seemed to contradict one another, and it was impossible for him to take either a straightforwardly fideist or naturalist position because of his physico-theological commitment, in which natural explanation and religious belief converge.⁶⁹ As Vidal writes: ‘Denying vampires outright, without leaving open a remote possibility that they be real, seemed to Calmet dangerously close to refusing authenticated apparitions and resurrections. Under the circumstances, only suspension of judgment appeared safe.’⁷⁰

The vampire crazes of the mid eighteenth century would come to an end after prolonged official investigations and condemnations by imperial authorities. Empress Maria Theresa’s court physician, Gerhard van Swieten, wrote a report against vampirism beliefs and the Empress issued a *Decree on Vampires* in March 1755 condemning belief in vampirism as ‘superstition and

⁶⁷ See Peter Harrison for a grand narrative about the shift from a symbolic attitude to a literalist approach to nature and religion. Peter Harrison, *The Bible, Protestantism, and the Rise of Natural Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

⁶⁸ Calmet, cited in Vidal, p. 82.

⁶⁹ For Calmet, if the vampire as a corporeal revenant was physically impossible, it would cast doubt on the theological maxim of the resurrection of the body. Because of his religious beliefs, he had to admit the possibility of vampirism against his philosophical convictions.

⁷⁰ Vidal, p. 82.

fraud'. She observed that investigations had found nothing unnatural. She prohibited religious orders and local authorities from making judgements in vampire cases and declared vampirism a mere figment of the imagination.

Conclusion: a spectrum of imagination

Vampires were creatures at the borders of what was acceptable in early modern medical, philosophical and theological discourse. Nevertheless, some scholars tried to get to grips with the phenomenon and tried to explain it (or explain it away). Sometimes, they had to go to the limits of their conceptual framework to do this. This gives us an excellent opportunity to study the diversity, latitude and flexibility of the belief systems of early modern scholars and savants. Typically, explanations of curious events in the early modern period drew on certain characteristics of the imagination. This study of early modern theories of vampirism serves as an excellent lens to trace a whole spectrum of different views of the imagination, and how changes occurred from the mid-seventeenth century till the mid-eighteenth century.

The central characteristics of vampirism were not stable throughout the early modern period. Vampires started to suck blood only in the late seventeenth century and they became more and more embodied in the course of the eighteenth century. Furthermore, scholarly authors were careful in deciding what to accept of the stories that were circulated before they started their explanatory endeavours. Some authors, such as Marigner, accepted the semi-corporeal visions of wandering dead and the sucking and carrying away of blood. Ranft, on the other hand, dismissed the belief that vampires sucked blood as ridiculous, but he accepted that some corpses could have pernicious effects on the living, because of the magical powers of their imagination. Sceptical writers did not accept much of popular vampire lore. They did admit that in some cases many people fell ill at the same time, and they tried to account for this by introducing the idea of an epidemic of the imagination. For his part, Calmet did not know what

to believe, because his philosophical and religious commitments pulled in different directions, and his writings testify to this ambivalence. Finally, the future Pope Benedict XIV, Empress Maria Theresa and later rationalists such as Voltaire, denied any truth to the popular vampire beliefs.

I have particularly focussed on the first reception of vampirism in Western Europe. The first theoretical tracts explaining vampirism emerged from a circle of thinkers interested in natural magic and the occult. Looking at the way they employed the imagination in their theories, I also contrasted their views with a selection of later writers on vampirism. All the writers I studied used the concept of the imagination to make their case. For all of them, vampirism was a ‘disease of the imagination’ or an ‘imaginary disease’ in one sense or another. But it should be clear that they all had different concepts of the ‘imagination’ and many used multiple meanings of the word in the same text. Some referred to the imagination of the victims to explain why they withered away, while others attributed pernicious effects to the still active imagination of the buried corpse. Ranft, for instance, employed the full spectrum of the imagination in his theories, from weak and unreal to strong and with real effects on external bodies. He referred in different places and for different purposes to the product of the imagination as a humanly invented figment or maybe even fraud, to the imagination as a psychosomatic power with the potential to create an epidemic, and to the imagination as a magical force that could act outside its proper body.

For magically oriented writers such as Marigner and Ranft, imagination and reality were not in opposition. The imagination of someone could have a very real, direct and natural effect on someone else. The power of the imagination did not refer to the isolated internal world of a lunatic, but to a power to affect the world in a very concrete and directed manner. The imagination was even so powerful that it could act after the death of a person, and it was this strong imagination that turned him or her into a vampire. For Marigner and Ranft, the imagination was a moral and religious faculty as much as it was grounded in a physical and

physiological reality. This ambiguity allowed these authors to merge religious and natural explanations. As Marigner asserted, vampirism is partly a natural and partly a supernatural phenomenon. For them, a disease was not just some bodily affliction, but it could be a divine punishment or warning at the same time. In this account, religion, natural philosophy and natural magic merged without conflict.

More sceptical writers, such as the authors of the articles in the *Lettres Juives* and the *Glanneur historique*, but also Calmet and Lambertini, moved their attention from the imagination of the deceased person or ‘vampire’ to the imagination of the victims instead. In their account too, the imagination could be very forceful, but it affected only the victim’s own mind and body. Here the imagination is a ‘psychosomatic’ force, but such a strong one that it could bring about death in the space of a few days. There are some hints that the imagination of the victim could also affect the imagination of other victims, having a contagious transitive effect, and sometimes resulting in real epidemics. This is not thought of in magical terms, however, but is a ‘moral’ force that works by the impact of stories and images combined with fear and credulity.

Finally, Empress Maria Theresa and her physician dismiss all there is to vampirism as illusions of the imagination. The imagination is locked up in the internal realms of a solipsistic mind. At the end of this history, the imagination creates only figments. The spectrum of different powers and meanings of the imagination in the early modern period is reduced to a powerless faculty that only produces unreal spectres.⁷¹

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