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Titolo dell'intervista: "*Dracula in Iceland*". *An Interview with Marinella Lőrinczi*, written by Maurizio Tani

[Other contribution](#)

NM. You can be considered one of today's most important Dracula scholars, especially for studies such as *Dracula & Company. The Appeal of the North in Bram Stoker's Novels* (1998), *Transylvania and the Balkans as Multiethnic Regions in the Works of Bram Stoker* (1996), *A Sea Landscape with Victorian Ladies. Three Essays on Dracula* (1995), or *In the Dragon's Labyrinth. An Introduction to Dracula* (1992). But, how did an esteemed university teacher of Romanian and Romance linguistics, indeed the disciple of Iorgu Iordan, develop an interest in Dracula? And why is Dracula still so popular today?

ML. Thank you for the kind appreciation. I have the deep conviction that a genuine, really good scholar of Bram Stoker's most famous novel *Dracula* should investigate the whole literary production of this interesting writer, and connect the novel with his other narratives, both short and long. It is not entirely my case, I must confess, although I tried to compare Dracula with other two novels of his, i.e. *The Lady of the Shroud* and *The Jewel of Seven Stars*. However, I can be excused, because my main research subjects - as you mentioned - are not English literature or literature of the Victorian age. I did not begin my Dracula studies reading in English, but in Romanian and Italian. After that beginning, I was obliged not to avoid the English language, therefore my initial, very poor knowledge of this language improved and now I am able to read, understand, and study essays as well as works of fictional literature. All this thanks to Dracula... A nearly unknown Dracula to me, at the beginning, because in Romania - my country of birth - Stoker's novel has no special significance, and only the historical person has, who lived in the XV century - he is called normally Vlad Tepes, that is, Vlad the Impaler - and is best known from history textbooks (as voivode, that is governor of Wallachia, now South Romania). Therefore my first and almost casual glance was at the historical figure, in the historical documents regarding him, and not at the novel. And this kind of interest fits with the interests of the philologist in the wider sense. It fits with my interests in multiethnic areas, like the Balkans or Transylvania, in commonplaces, and, first of all, in the mystification of research activities and products. There is plenty of examples of just such mystifications in much secondary literature dealing with *Dracula*. Why people are so attracted by the vampire or, more specifically, by the Dracula theme, unfortunately, I can't answer in a satisfactory way. I made a hypothetical connection between the popular culture of the United States, which are the first and most successful propagator of the fame of Dracula the vampire, and Halloween as the context of reception of Dracula; in other words, between a kind of carnival and the everchanging Dracula, and I realised, during the *Dracula* centenary celebrations in Los Angeles in 1997, that I was right. But people are mostly interested in the vampire movies and not in the novel, so Stoker's *Dracula* is widely known and little read. And this interest generates movies upon movies, in a neverending way.

NM. In your books and essays you present Bram Stoker's Dracula as deeply connected to Nordic, Scandinavian cultures. How did Bram Stoker succeed in connecting the Danubian Dracula with Scandinavia? And why?

ML. If you read Dracula's fictional autobiography, in the third chapter of the novel, the answer lays therein: "... in our [Dracula's] veins flows the blood of many races ... the Ugric tribe bore down [to the frontier of Turkey-land, on the Danube] from Iceland the fighting spirit [of] Thor and Wodin ..."; and then he mentions the Berserkers, the terrible Nordic warriors as his ancient relatives. There are a lot of similar details, on the surface of the novel, or hidden in semantic associations, which I have analysed. You can recognise, for example, the ideas of the late Roman historian Jordanes (6th c. A.D.), the historian of the Goths, about the origin of European peoples: "*Scandia*" is "*vagina gentium*", the womb of nations. I think that there is a cultural-philosophical background, related to the romantic gothicism of the 19th century and of the previous century too, that explains Stoker's mild and vague but certain, in

my opinion, inclination toward Scandinavian culture.

NM. Yes, in Bram Stoker's novel, Dracula does declare to be a descendent of Huns and Scandinavian Berserkers. But how much is Dracula himself a Viking, an Icelander, a creature of the North?

ML. You are mentioning his pedigree, his asserted noble origins, that justify and announce his aggressive behaviour in his fictional future. But his "nordic-ness" belongs to the past, whereas he is a fictional contemporary of his author, of Stoker; and in that world he is a stranger coming from Eastern Europe and a loser. He is outside the "European community". Don't you think that Stoker had an excellent flare?

NM. Is Dracula a southerner, in any way, Mediterranean?

ML. He can be alike in the movies, I think, when dark-haired actors like Bela Lugosi or Frank Langella played the character. But in the novel he is not at all Mediterranean, for he comes from the eastern borders of civilized Europe, he is a Barbarian. A noble one, but Barbarian, a noble savage transformed into an invader, into a migrant. Therefore he is fearful, he must be.

NM. You are from Transylvania, one of the most beautiful and rich parts of Europe - in its variety of cultures, traditions and landscapes. Why do you think Bram Stoker chose to have a Székely, Transylvanian Dracula?

ML. I was born in Transylvania, but grew up in Bucharest. Transylvania is not my actual homeland, it is my father's. But I know well the history of Transylvania, so I can answer your question, obviously from my point of view. You must recall that Transylvania is now a significant and historical region of Romania, but in Stoker's time (Stoker died in 1912) it belonged to Austria-Hungary. The unsteady political situation of Austria-Hungary caused the ignition of the First World War. Transylvania was in the focus of Western politicians' attention as one of the most important and explosive European multiethnic areas. I think that Stoker was looking for a very exotic and untamed minority of Europe to settle there Dracula. A Hungarian-speaking minority whose name (Székely) is not related to "Hungarian", who is living almost beyond, trans-Transsylvania, in any case not in "proper" Hungary, with a fame for pride and self-consciousness, and so on. He was creating an allegory, an artistic model of what could happen if a minority explodes, getting fed up with its situation. It was not Gladstone, in 1845, who said: "Ireland! Ireland!... That coming storm!?" And Stoker was an English-speaking and writing Irishman. And Dracula became a coming storm too, threatening Victorian England.

NM. Do you see a connection between Szekelyland (a Hungarian religious and linguistic island in a Romanian/Orthodox area, homeland of Bram Stoker's Dracula), Ireland (the homeland of Bram Stoker), Iceland (the land of origin of Dracula's "fighting spirit which Thor and Wodin gave" him) and Sardinia (your present homeland)? Are islands special in a similar way? I ask this question because I have in mind, for example, the similarities in the very ancient traditional dances that you can still witness in Transylvania, Sardinia and the Faroe Islands.

ML. I don't know Iceland, unfortunately. I never visited Iceland, nor the Faroe Islands, though I would like to. I know Ireland better, and Sardinia quite well. I think, that is to say, I learned, that small or medium-sized islands' history and culture depend on their relations with their respective mainlands, so each island is different. The similarities in traditional dances, if you are thinking of so-called "round" dances, the circular-chain dances, exist everywhere, independently of the shape or size of the geographic areas. I am not a traditional-dance specialist, but I read about them and saw them in documentaries about several countries. I think that it is a social universal: sitting, dancing, speaking, eating in a circle, there is no rank difference, and every member of the community, of the group, has the same place. Think, for example, of the legendary Round Table.

NM. Among your main interests there is also the study of the Sardinian languages. How did you develop this interest of yours? How would you describe the situation of the Sardinian languages: are they in danger of extinction, as many other local languages in Italy and in Europe? How much do Sardinians and Italians care about these disappearing languages? Do you think it is possible and desirable to save them in today's globalized world?

ML. You are asking many important questions about minority languages. As you mention, in Sardinia, there are many languages, such as Sardinian, a truly indigenous language, or the Catalan of the town of Alghero. The dominant Italian is exogenous, of external origin. Between the XVI and the XVIII century, instead, the dominant language was Spanish. I began studying Sardinian casually, as a normal branch of Romance linguistics; this part of the story is not really interesting. After graduating in Bucharest, I got married in Sardinia and have lived there since. It was and is normal, again as a linguist, for me to study Sardinian.

Most recently I have become a keen observer of attitudes to language, because the study of lesser used languages involves quite a significant impact, both emotional and political. The European Union is promoting minority languages, theoretically and financially; yet, in this way, minority studies, which still lack an official ethical code, could transform into a mostly bureaucratic and academic business. There is no warranty that this top-down, authoritative, promotion is conformable to real and widespread social needs in a society where literacy is universal, schooling is universal, and schools have their own language policy. Consider, for example, that everyone wants to learn English today, or that some subjects are taught extensively in English at the school level and at the university level. This fact means the beginning of the loss, or in any case a functional restriction, of the former dominant language, such as Italian, in our case. Therefore Italian, an historically important and non-minority language, needs protection or special attention as well.

The loss of a minority language must be prevented because linguistic and cultural variety, like biological variety, is quite simply good per se and necessary from a modern point of view. But linguistic variety means also that people should be allowed and able to speak all kinds of dialects as well, for dialects too are minor idioms. What is the difference between the protection and promotion of minority languages and of dialects? The hidden idea here is that a minority language belongs to a potential nation, which could develop into an independent state in certain circumstances, hence it is more important; whilst dialects belong to a part of it, hence they are less important. It is not on biological or natural grounds, but on historical grounds that one human group can be defined as a nation and another cannot. Therefore minor idioms are not alike and can be more or less easily discriminated against. Or, more precisely, speakers are different and discriminated against. And discrimination on linguistic basis must be avoided too. Speakers as individuals and as members of a community must be protected, but the balance between individual rights and group right is not easy, and it depends also on who is representing the group and its rights: politicians, intellectuals, bureaucrats, associations, agencies...

Besides, is the whole population of a specific geographic area ever asked how they would like to use their repertoire languages? And how is actually defined this population? UNESCO documents, on these topics, refer to individuals and about human groups with inalienable linguistic rights. Yet take Sardinians, for example, and I mean people living in Sardinia, in a geographically closed area, an island. They are linguistically heterogeneous. Why must politics represent only the Sardinian-speaking people, who are also Italian-speaking? Perhaps the other people in Sardinia do not possess the same linguistic rights? Is it only the Sardinian language the actual, representative one? And within the Sardinian language, which dialect is more representative, so as to aspire to become the common language? Why central dialects are thought to be the best, to have more chances to become the language of all? As you can well infer from my own questions, linguistic protection and promotion involve several serious, preliminary, and mostly unresolved problems.

NM. I have the impression that, at least in Italy, whenever you talk about popular culture, dialects, or regional cultures, you are immediately accused to be provincial, backwards-minded, nostalgic, even anti-modern. Do you agree?

ML. No, I do not agree. First, traditional culture, including local language, does exist. Rather, it depends on the ideological point of view whether you want to promote it or not. On the other hand, in touristically

developed areas or in areas where the local leaders want to gain more power, more autonomy, language and local traditions are often used as a kind of advertising, and as a tool for political propaganda, whether good or bad, useful or not. As though one were saying: "We are special, we are different, so we want, we need, we deserve ...". After all, "glocalisation" is possible, it means a mixture of global and local. The question is whether you want to adopt this model or not.

NM. You are mainly a scholar of Romanian. Is it difficult to promote Romanian culture and language in Italy? I ask this question in connection with the negative prejudices that many Italians still have about Eastern Europe, Romania, not to mention non-western-looking foreigners.

ML. I can see that students and young people in general are curious about Romania and Romanian language and culture. But it is true that now, the general circumstances are not good for their promotion. As of 2007, when Romania became a full member of the EU, Italy received not only a somewhat physiologically "normal" wave of immigrants from Romania, but also an "abnormal" one, which results from the demographic disasters of 1980s Romania. If there were already negative prejudices, then they became much stronger because of this. Indeed, I was advised not to tell around that I was from Romania, though I have not followed this advice.

NM. Is it possible that some difficulties that you have experimented are caused by the fact that today in the academe, and in the cultural system overall, we study the different national cultures inside institutions that are organized according to the classification in language families made by linguists? For example, students of Hungarian language and culture are asked to study Finnish, but probably they are never asked to study Slavic language and cultures or Romanian.

ML. You are right on this last issue, but I think that it is not question of linguistic proximity, rather of ideological proximity. If neighbours disagree or quarrel, they cannot be promoters of each other's culture and language.

NM. Why are you interested in the Csàngòs, the very little Hungarian minority of Romanian Moldavia? Maybe because of the fact that they have preserved so many elements of the cultures of both Romania and Hungary?

ML. I conducted field-work in Csàngò-land rather casually: I made the acquaintance of Ferenc Pozsony, a very active ethnologist at the University of Kolozsvár/Cluj and so I got involved, once, in a study project. It became a very interesting experience for me: I had to come up with a research topic, because I had none, so I studied bilingual anthroponymy on the graveyard crosses. And that is all, for the moment, although I feel that I am in the best position for studying the idioms of Csàngòs. I know Hungarian, Romanian, I live in a western country, and I am not under the pressure of nationalistic or religious agendas. I wanted to study, then, the question of linguistic competence in such an intricate bilingual context as theirs. Whether in so doing I helped improving the rather tense Romanian-Hungarian relations, I do not know, although I hope I did.

NM. As a well-travelled scholar, what do you think are the main differences between northern Europe and the Mediterranean region?

ML. Geographers, historians and anthropologists have not answered yet the question about the South-North border in Europe. Said in a nutshell, there is no such border in reality; you can always find a northern or a southern area if you are not in Malta, in the South, or in Alta, Norway, in the North, which can be considered as the two most extreme points of Europe along a vertical axis. Also, south of Malta is Africa, and north of Alta is the North Pole. The world does not end there either. The South-North border is in our minds, in our prejudices, varying themselves with the historical epoch in which we happen to live. Yes, I have travelled much, I like to travel, I like every place, I never get bored anywhere. All is interesting and instructive. It is amusing for me when, for example, some Danes, who live North to Sardinia, to Italy, to Romania, think that I do not know anything about the snow! Now, Bucharest is

colder in winter than Denmark; then, northern Italy, in the Alps, is also much colder than Denmark, and many ski-champions are from the north of Italy. Yet geographical distortion is common in our minds and leads to prejudices or even springs from them. At the same time, correct geographical knowledge is so important, so essential, that now, in the so-called globalised era, literary criticism has developed a new trend, called "geocriticism", which, I quote from a textbook, "involves the study of places described in the literature by various authors, but it can also study the effects of literary representations of a given space". I applied this method in the first essay of the volume of mine dedicated to Dracula's wreck in Whitby, after visiting this delightfully small, but historically very important town, situated on the southern shore of the North Sea. I recommend it to you and to your readers.

NM. Why do you think there are still problems in having foreign, e.g. Italian, university degrees fully recognized in the Nordic countries? Is it only a question of immigration policy?

ML. The opposite should be true. The whole Bologna process aims, among other things, to remove this obstacle. But the inner, national university traditions are very strong everywhere and they change very slowly, despite the new European protocols, new norms, official recommendations, etc. Indeed I could tell you the bizarre history of the ten-year university reform process in Italy, from 2000 to 2010, which could now cause the whole system to collapse. But this is another story ...

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