



Konstellations

The Demon's Daemon, or Fear and Trembling in New Orleans

Par Maureen-Claude Laperriere

Fichier : 0601.11.pdf

Maureen-Claude.Laperriere ©

bloodlust@sympatico.ca

Lestat wants to be a saint. "I want to save souls by the millions," he says, "I want to do good far and wide. I want to fight evil!"¹ This is how *Blood Canticle*, Anne Rice's last novel of the *Vampire Chronicles* begins, with her star monster longing for Christianity. At the inception of the *Chronicles*, Lestat is normal enough, as far as vampires go. As he maintains, "Death, disease, time, gravity, they mean nothing to me...I'm a condemned inhabitant of eternal night and an eternally tormented blood seeker". Lestat fits the archetype of the vampire, albeit the "new and improved" model, which we shall visit shortly. Lestat's unorthodox (as it were) new calling will demand of him not only the performance of the three requisite miracles and a life given over to heroic sanctity, but also on behalf of sinners, a paradoxical proximity to God.

In his *Philosophical Fragments*, Kierkegaard uses the word "conversion" to designate the moment where the learner, having realized that he was untruth, continually in the process of departing from the truth, has charted his spiritual course in the opposite direction. In the specific instance in which I am interested, we can indeed define this moment as one of conversion for Lestat. As Kierkegaard emphasizes, this conversion cannot take place without its being assimilated into the subject's consciousness, leaving him with a sorrowful feeling which Kierkegaard refers to as repentance, a transition from "not to be" to "to be". And, most significantly, it is, to Kierkegaard the "teacher" who introduces the occasion to obtain the truth, to bring it to the learner, along with the condition for understanding it. The teacher reminds the subject (the vampire) that he is untruth and this through his own fault. The state of unacknowledged untruth, says Kierkegaard, is that of sin. And this teacher, for Lestat who wants to be a saint, is no other than God. This master, then, this teacher-who-is-actually-not-a-teacher-but-a-judge, is the one who will usher his student into the next moment, the moment filled with the eternal, in the fullness of time. To accept the condition, therefore, Lestat must accept the master, he for whom he strives to be a saint. This master is none other than Lestat's daemon, the one who calls and inspires, who dictates negatively, without saying a word. The one whom Lestat would gladly serve, and who he aches to define.

In fact, Lestat's quest begins in Rice's second installment of the *Vampire Chronicles* (*The Vampire Lestat*), where her protagonist begins his search for identity and someone (or something) to venerate. His search leads him to Marius, a millennium vampire who finally reveals himself to Lestat in a scene redolent of the divine and the erotic. Lestat's first revelation comes to him as he lies underground in the Middle East, in self-imposed exile, "under the olive trees". "It was in the garden," says Lestat. His own Gethsemane.

And I was rising, just as if I were being lifted, up out of the earth, though this figure stood with its hands at its side. At last, it lifted its arms to enfold me and the face I saw was beyond the realm of possibility. What one of us could have such a face? What did we know of patience, of seeming goodness, of compassion? No, it wasn't one of us, it couldn't have been...I believe that I said some mad thing, voiced some frantic thought, that I knew now the secret of eternity.²

At that moment, Lestat is indeed delivered, quite literally, from the earth. What he hears before his deliverance from his personal hell is "a giant bass drum...a cannon boom".³ And Marius has the demeanor of a god, "His hair was thick, white and gold strands mingled in waves fallen loosely around his face, and over his broad forehead. And the blue eyes might have been brooding under their heavy golden brows had they not been so large, so softened with the feeling

¹ Anne Rice, *Blood Canticle*, Toronto, Knopf Canada, 2003, p. 3.

² Anne Rice, *The Vampire Lestat*, New York, Ballantine Books, 1985, p. 362.

³ Rice 359-61.

expressed in the voice" (362).⁴ Hollywood could not have delivered up such a perfect figure of God.

Lestat's fulfillment is but short-lived, however. Marius is indeed old, older than any other of the vampire's kith and kin, but age does not bestow divinity. Marius is still, Lestat feels, "The purest visage of *human* love" (italics mine).⁵ The historical moment when Marius delivers/exalts Lestat is grounded in the historical, and although it is glorious, it is not of the eternal. Lestat's quest is far from over.

Lestat's quest is not for the mortal, it is for the divine. Much as he loves Marius, it is a love born of acceptance into a filiation which is all too human, too mortal. The master whom he seeks, the sainthood which he claims, is beyond this. In needing to claim the eternal, Lestat must become a beacon for Christ, for God. "Le grand paradoxe chrétien," says Jon Sobrino, "que l'on peut facilement répéter, mais reste difficile à assimiler véritablement : être seigneur, c'est servir".⁶ And so Lestat sets his sights on being a saint.

In Book IV of *The Vampire Chronicles*, Rice's little-known *The Tale of the Body Thief*, Lestat is finally able to move upward in his quest for God. In the body of a human with whom he has traded his own undead body for a brief while, he barter the carnal for the eternal, the supine for the divine, with a nun who is nursing him back from pneumonia. Lestat recognizes Gretchen as a nun immediately, through her strong nurturing hands, the little silver wedding band, "...and something about [her] face, a radiance – the radiance of those who believe...there was something in her which suggested a profound resignation".⁷ Gretchen's spirituality is enticing to Lestat. Her belief in God holds a mystery, an appeal, that he feels the need to access. The purity, the simplicity of her brand of Christianity beckons; it is this moment which is his occasion.

"Do you believe in God?" he asks, and she answers,

"My life has been one of self-sacrifice ever since I can remember. That is what I believe in. I believe I must do everything I can to lessen misery. That is all I can do and that is something enormous. It is a great power...yes, I do believe in God and in Christ. So do you."

"No, I don't." I said.

"When you were feverish you did. You spoke of God and the Devil the way I've never heard anyone else speak of them...You have a great simplicity to you. The simplicity of a saint."⁸

Gretchen has opened the door to sanctity. Lestat asks her what she is doing in New Orleans, away from her mission in South America.

"Do you know the real reason why I took a leave of absence?" she asked me, "...I wanted to know a man". She continues, "I think there's a reason you took *your* leave of absence...there is a secret reason you came down to earth," she said, "that you came into the body of a man. Same reason that Christ did it."

"And that is?"

"Redemption."⁹

The pact is sealed.

⁴ Rice 362.

⁵ Rice 362.

⁶ Jon Sobrino, *Jésus en Amérique latine : sa signification pour la foi et la christologie*, Paris, Éditions du Cerf, 1986, p. 256.

⁷ Anne Rice, *The Tale of the Body Thief*, New York, Ballantine Books, 1993, p. 229.

⁸ Rice, *Body Thief*, p. 233-5.

⁹ Rice, *Body Thief*, p. 236.

Lestat is not the vampire we have come to know through Hollywood and pulp fiction. In an essay entitled "Has Dracula Lost His Fangs?" Dracula scholar Elizabeth Miller says, "Sympathetic vampires are more appealing to some contemporary readers, but this attraction has a price – the loss of some of the power, grandeur and intensity that comes from a confrontation with something utterly evil".¹⁰ The archetype of the vampire has evolved (or devolved, as far as archetypes go) from that of a hideous bloodsucker whose touch breeds death, to that of solicitous subject who is reluctant to handle religious artefacts for fear of desecrating them, and who is concerned that his "victims" be sexually fulfilled. Centuries before Rice created Lestat, Stoker writes,

That poor soul who has wrought all this misery is the saddest case of all. Just think what will be his joy when he, too, is destroyed in his worse part than his better part may have spiritual immortality. You must be pitiful to him too, though it may not hold your hands from his destruction.¹¹

Gone is the ugly zombie of yore, the ghastly ghoul who struck terror in one's heart. This new and improved Romantic subject no longer repels in a straightforward manner. The spell he casts now is far more insidious.

Fear of the vampire occurs on three levels:

- A visceral, guttural fear of what is different, ugly, repulsive to our sensibilities – the expected response to the pasty-faced, gaunt, be-fanged claw-handed Nosferatu-type vampire.
- The fear of being physically maimed by said ugly creature, of feeling the physical pain of having one's throat ripped open, of having our body boundaries transgressed.
- The far more complex (and more significant) fear of having our cerebral/emotional/spiritual selves in thrall to the evil/unclean/ungodly after the physical assault.

This last fear is, by far, the worst, because it makes no allowance for free will, offers no succour or chance of redemption, removes forever the Kierkegaardian promise of "occasion" which can lead to the transcendent. The occasion now lies beyond our reach.

This third fear plays itself out for Gretchen in the form of extreme anxiety. Lestat announces himself, in Kierkegaardian terms, as the "posited sin" which, by definition, is a consequence foreign to freedom. As Kierkegaard maintains,

This consequence announces itself, and anxiety relates itself to the future appearance of this consequence, which is the possibility of a new state. No matter how deep an individual has sunk, he can sink still deeper, and this "can" is the object of anxiety.¹²

This is an anxiety, for Gretchen, which cannot be disarmed.

The only thing that is truly able to disarm the sophistry of sin is faith, courage to believe that the state itself is a new sin, courage to renounce anxiety without anxiety, which only faith can do; faith does not thereby annihilate anxiety, but, itself eternally young, it extricates itself from anxiety's moment of death. Only faith is able to do this, for only in faith is the synthesis eternal and at every moment possible.¹³

¹⁰ Elizabeth Miller, *Reflections on Dracula: Ten Essays*, White Rock, BC, Transylvania Press, 1997, p. 25.

¹¹ Bram Stoker, *Dracula*, New York, Signet Books, 1992, p. 314.

¹² Soren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments, or a Fragment of Philosophy/Johannes Climacus, or De omnibus dubitandum est*, Princeton, Princeton UP, 1985, p. 113.

¹³ Kierkegaard, p. 117.

The damage has been done, the blasphemy that has been committed is two-fold; not only has Gretchen committed a sin of the flesh by offering up her body to the devil, she has tempted him to seek God, to strive to be like God, indeed to simulate the Christ. She, herself, has pointed out the parallel to Lestat.

The fear which intervenes here is indicated as the ambivalent root interweaving fear and love that underlies vampirism. Freud depicts an analogous ambivalence in his *Totem and Taboo* regarding the taboo on the dead. Lestat is, for all intents and purposes, *supposed* to be dead. The taboo arises, as per Freud's elucidation, from the contrast between conscious pain and unconscious satisfaction over the death that has occurred. Unfortunately, it follows that those with the most to fear are the living who are closest to the vampire. Gretchen has not only been close to Lestat, she has willingly offered herself up to him. Hence, one can surmise that the ambivalence exists within the psyche of the person suffering from the fear. The awareness, as described by Freud, that the perturbing element is *within*, that one is carrying inside oneself the monsters that we fear, produces the sense that one is going mad. And as we discover when Lestat visits Gretchen at her mission, this is exactly what happens.

"Gretchen, don't be afraid of me. In the name of truth, look at me. You made me promise I would come. Gretchen, I don't lie to you. You saved me, and there is no God."

"Get away from me, unclean spirit! Get out of this house of God!"

"I won't hurt you!"

"In the name of God, get away from me...go!" Her right hand groped again for the cross and she held it towards me, her face flushed and her lips wet and loose and trembling in her hysteria, her eyes devoid of reason as she spoke again. I saw it was a crucifix with the tiny, twisted body of the dead Christ.

"In the name of truth, Gretchen, I answered, my voice as low as hers, and as full of feeling. "I lay with you! I am here."

"Liar!" she hissed, "Liar!"

In another instant, surely, she would lose her reason altogether, helpless screams would break from her, and the whole night would hear her.¹⁴

Helpless, Lestat can only witness the dismantlement of Gretchen's faith as she runs to the mission church, falling to her knees and imploring the Lord to forgive her as she feels the distance growing. "Deliver me from Evil, oh Lord, take me to you, Sacred Heart of Jesus, gather me into your arms".¹⁵

As Abraham was tried by the Lord, he "fought with that cunning power which invents everything...he had fought with Time and preserved his faith."¹⁶ And at the moment when Abraham was asked to render up his only son to God as a gage of this Faith, all the terror of the strife was concentrated in one instant. Abraham rises above, while Gretchen falls.

¹⁴ Rice, *Body Thief*, p. 355.

¹⁵ Rice, *Body Thief*, p. 357.

¹⁶ Kierkegaard, p. 14.

Works Cited

Kierkegaard, Soren, *Philosophical Fragments, or a Fragment of Philosophy/Johannes*

Climacus, or De omnibus dubitandum est. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1985.

Miller, Elizabeth, *Reflections on Dracula: Ten Essays.* White Rock, BC, Transylvania Press, 1997.

Rice, Anne, *Blood Canticle.* Toronto: Knopf Canada, 2003.

---. *The Tale of the Body Thief.* New York: Ballantine Books, 1993.

---. *The Vampire Lestat.* New York: Ballantine Books, 1985.

Sobrino, Jon, *Jésus en Amérique latine : sa signification pour la foi et la christologie,* Paris :

Éditions du Cerf, 1986.

Stoker, Bram. *Dracula.* New York : Signet Books, 1992.