

# The Insidious Poison of Degeneration: Vampires in Czech Decadence

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The Czech decadents around the journal *The Modern Revue*, particularly Jiří Karásek and Karel Hlaváček, often stylized themselves as vampires, which in a programmatic poem the latter dubbed “the symbol of decadence”. In this essay I shall explore what this metaphor meant for the Czechs, a topic that has never been discussed at length. I will base my analysis on close readings of selected works within the context of the *fin-de-siècle* decadent movement throughout Europe. The vampire was a potent motif for the Czech decadents, representing both culture in general, conceived as a vampiric force that drains physical strength, and decadence in particular, which infects its readers with the venom of pessimism. For Karásek, the vampire metaphor also carried marked homoerotic overtones. The vampire topos may further be interpreted in socio-political terms, in view of the Czechs’ status as subjects within the Austro-Hungarian Empire: in Czech decadence, the image of the vampire overlaps with that of the barbarian, who threatens to lay siege to the empire from without. In contrast to the barbarian, however, the vampire is an internal force of entropy, a symbol of degeneration, which undermines the empire from within. At the same time, Czech vampires drain the last remaining strength from their own nation and culture and infect one another with deadly poisons that spread the curse of vampirism. The vampire in Czech decadence represents insidious, corrosive resistance from within, resistance that poisons itself along with its oppressors.

The late nineteenth century was haunted by apprehensions of degeneration, which was believed to result from humanity’s removal from the conditions necessary for natural selection according to Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution. Influential degeneration theorists such as Cesare Lombroso and Max Nordau propagated the view that the overly refined culture created by modern-day civilization was causing man to regress rather than evolve, and as a result, society was sick, or, in other words, decadent. Artists, they claimed, were among the most degenerate of all. Decadent writers appropriated this vision of artists as degenerates and society in decay and created protagonists and lyrical personae afflicted by the nervous illnesses, hypersensitivity, weakness, apathy, and despair associated with degeneration. With subtle irony, Joris-Karl Huysmans celebrated the symptoms of degeneration as the source of creative genius in his 1884 novel *Against Nature*, a manifesto of the decadent movement in prose. In the programmatic 1892 essay *Towards a Psychology of the Individual I: Chopin and Nietzsche*, the influential Polish decadent Stanislaw Przybyszewski



similarly argued in colorful prose that nervous pathology is the font of inspiration (Przybyszewski 1895/1896). Conservative critics, on the other hand, warned against an overemphasis on culture and intellect at the expense of physical health. In Bohemia, František V. Krejčí, for instance, asserted in 1892 that the process of acquiring culture is what weakens every civilization (Krejčí 1892, p. 263), and in 1896 he mourned what he called “*the tragedy of all culture: the higher and more noble it is, the less right it has to exist*, for it is a superfluous and harmful hotbed in which life rots and weakens” (Krejčí 1896, p. 600).<sup>1</sup> We must accept this fact, he maintained, and give up our putrid culture to seek health, life, and morality.

As Michael J. Dennison illustrates in his study on vampirism and decadence, in decadent literature throughout Europe, vampirism is portrayed as a subversive force, often representing contagion, including the spread of degeneration and venereal disease (Dennison 2001, p. 106). Decadence, he notes, like romanticism, often portrays works of art themselves as vampiric, sucking the life blood out of their models, as in Edgar Allan Poe’s *The Oval Portrait*, in which the sitter dies once her portrait has been completed. I would add that Nikolai Gogol’s *The Portrait* is another example of this trend. This story describes not only how an evil money-lender “dies into art”, which takes on his life force as his portrait is painted, but also how, through the painting, he haunts and preys on the protagonist Chartkov (Chertkov in the first variant of the story) and others who have the misfortune to view the work. Gogol’s story thus shows how works of art can suck the energy out of their viewers as well as their subjects. To my mind, in stories such as these artworks may thus be interpreted as synecdoches of culture, envisioned as an enervating force in accordance with the nineteenth-century fear that culture causes degeneration.

I would further add that in both romanticism and decadence, not only the subject of the work of art and its viewer or reader, but also the artist himself is often drained of life by his work. Friedrich Nietzsche, an idol of the decadents, gave expression to this view, stating: “If one has a talent, one is also its victim: one lives under the vampirism of one’s talent” (Nietzsche 1967, p. 431). Another contributor to *The Modern Revue*, the poet Otokar Březina, was convinced that he must sacrifice his physical strength to create works of genius. Following Huysmans and Przybyszewski, he believed that physical exhaustion and nervous ailments are at the root of great art. “Thought, like everything great and holy, has and will have its martyrs. May I become one of them,” he declared in a letter of December 1892 to his childhood friend František Bauer (Březina 2004, p. 263).<sup>2</sup> Art “demands blood and the ceaseless effort of inflamed nerves,” he wrote in a letter of 1893 (*ibid.*, p. 272).<sup>3</sup> The artist, he continued, must become a monk devoted only to the cult of art, sacrificing all else.

As Rae Beth Gordon has shown in a recent study, decadents in Western Europe mythologized their own works as vampiric. In Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian*

<sup>1</sup> In the original: “tragika vší kultury: čím je ona vyšší a ušlechtilejší, tím má méně práva na existenci, neboť jest zbytečným a škodlivým pařeništěm, v němž život zahnívá a slabne” (Krejčí’s emphasis). All translations are my own.

<sup>2</sup> In the original: “Myšlenka jako vše velké a svaté má a bude mít své mučenníky. Ať jsem jedním z nich [...]”.

<sup>3</sup> In the original: “vyžaduje krve a ustavičným úsilím spalovaných nervů”.

Gray, for instance, Dorian is given a “poisonous book” — Huysmans’s *Against Nature*, which sends him spiraling down into profound moral corruption from which he cannot escape, and in Huysmans’s *Là-bas*, Durtal is “infected” by the writings of the fifteenth-century sadist Gilles de Rais, about whom he is writing a book, and he cannot but immerse himself in the repulsive effusions of his sexual and criminal perversions (Gordon 1992, p. 219–220). Commentators in the 1890s, including Nordau, Krejčí, and the well-known Czech critic František X. Šalda, feared the “poisons” or “contagion” of decadent writings would spread, contaminating and weakening healthy segments of society. The vampiric nature of culture in general and decadence in particular is suggested in Hlaváček’s masterful 1896 cover for *The Modern Revue*, featuring a seductive female vampire whose legs narrow into dragon heads that emerge from an enormous book on which she sits (see illustration). Specifically, the book she is sitting on is *The Modern Revue* itself, which underscores the particularly “poisonous” nature of decadence. In my view, this image may be considered the emblem of Czech decadence, with its unique emphasis on vampirism.

The power of decadent literature to spread its venom and “infect” the reader is suggested in Karásek’s sonnet *My Poetry to the Reader*, published in the 1921 edition of the collection *Sodom*. The poem ends with the persona — Karásek’s own poetry — promising to infect the reader with its dark and pessimistic obsessions forevermore:

A navždy polibek rtů mých až tebe schvátí,  
Mou krásou raněn jsa, ty budeš zbožnovati,  
Co já ted’ zbožňuji: noc, marnost, osamění.

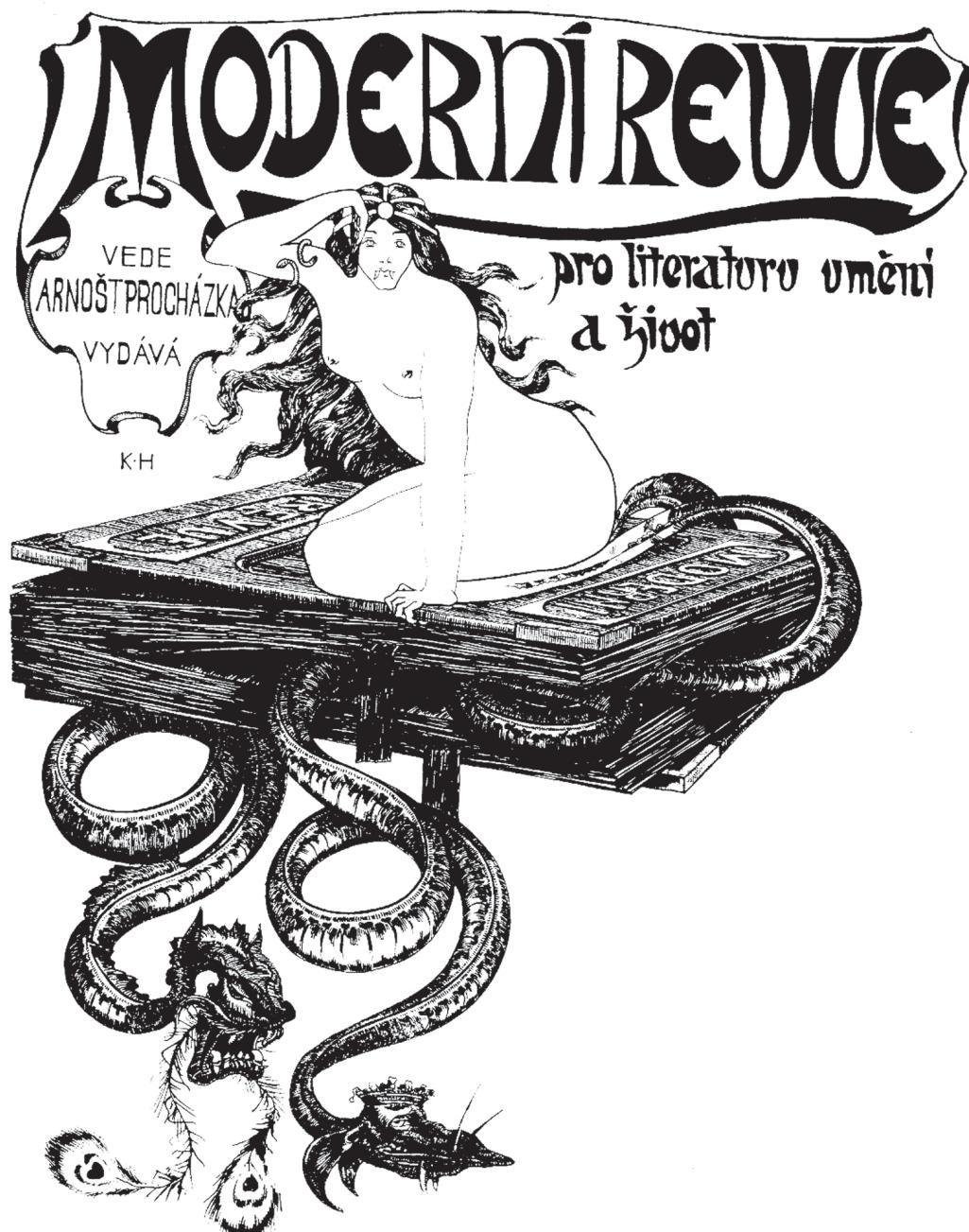
*And when the kiss of my lips entralls you forevermore,  
Wounded by my beauty, you always will adore  
What I now adore: solitude, vanity, night.*

(Karásek ze Lvovic [Má poesie ke čtenáři, 1921, s. 64]/2002, p. 69)

For the Czech decadents, then, the vampire is the perfect metaphor for art, especially decadent art, with its unhealthy themes of languor and despair. It preys on all who behold it: its creator, its model, and its audience. This conception of art is central to the final novel of Karásek’s trilogy, *Novels of Three Magi: Ganymede* (1925). Here a sculptor’s vision of the perfect work of art, which will live and behave exactly as a beautiful young man, but will not age, die, or be mired by physical reality, drains him of his life force. Upon completion of the living sculpture, or golem, he succumbs to tuberculosis, a disease often linked with the vampire motif, as Dennison notes (Dennison 2001, p. 123).<sup>4</sup> His curious friend Adrian finds his creation, gorgeous but immobile, and is immediately “infected” by the artists’ obsession, overcome by the drive to discover the artist’s secret of how to bring the being to life. It is the model for the sculpture, Radovan, however, who ultimately brings the golem to life,

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<sup>4</sup> Hlaváček died of tuberculosis in 1898 at the age of twenty-three; however, his disease did not influence his conception of the vampire as the “symbol of decadence” (1896), as he did not find out that he was ill until several months before his decease.



only to be killed by it. Art thus brings about the demise of both creator and model and poisons the life of the viewer. In the introduction to the novel Karásek writes that the classical story of the youth Ganymede, who was so beautiful that Zeus fell in love with him and, taking on the form of an eagle, snatched him up and bore him away into the “dark heights” (Karásek ze Lvovic 1925, p. 7)<sup>5</sup> is a symbol, intertwined with his own narrative. In my interpretation, for Karásek, Ganymede represents (male) physical beauty that enchants the artist, who desires to freeze mortal beauty eternally by making it artificial. He thus preserves it from the ravaging forces of age and death. In so doing, however, he deprives the mortal being of life itself, and is therefore unable to enjoy his beauty to the fullest. This tragic nature of art, which must deprive its model of life to retain his perfect beauty, is symbolized elsewhere in Karásek’s work by the classical youth Endymion, whom the gods put to sleep forever to preserve his loveliness. Karásek emphasized the importance of this conception of art as one that lives only by draining the beautiful mortal subject of life by titling his 1909 poetry collection *Endymion*. It is also central to the narrative of *Scarabeus*, the second novel of his trilogy (1908), in which the demonic yet attractive Marcel uses magic to put beautiful young men into an eternal sleep in which their loveliness is preserved forever.<sup>6</sup>

Given such conceptions of the infectious and potentially deadly power of art, it is no wonder that Hlaváček chose the vampire as “the symbol of decadence” in his programmatic 1896 poem *The Vampire*. In this poem the symbol of the vampire intersects with that of the barbarian, another dominant image not only in Czech decadence, but in the movement throughout Europe. Hlaváček identifies the vampire as a “white barbarian”, an allusion to Paul Verlaine’s famous programmatic 1883 sonnet *Languor*, with its first line, “I am the Empire at the end of the decadence”, which was published in *The Modern Revue* in a translation by the editor, Arnošt Procházka, in February 1896.<sup>7</sup> However, Hlaváček’s vampire is not a powerful Teuton, like those coming to destroy the Roman Empire in Verlaine’s poem, but a pale degenerate. The lyrical voice addresses him as:

Ty hrdý a bílý barbare, milenče všeho chorého, bledého,  
bezcitný a zase bázlivý, vznešený šílenče,  
jenž živíš se zbylou vitalnou silou panenských štáv,  
stižených dědičnou atrofí,  
symbole dekadence!

<sup>5</sup> In the original: “do temných výšin”.

<sup>6</sup> For more on the decadent motifs of living works of art and love for a statue or a beautiful corpse, see, for instance, Hustvedt 1998, p. 21–22. The motif of “killing into art” may be viewed as the opposite of the Pygmalion myth. Janet Beizer discusses this trope in Rачilde’s novella *Monsieur Vénus* in the context of Jean-Martin Charcot’s practice of casting in wax the convulsed bodies of his hysterical patients at the Salpêtrière hospital (Beizer 1998, p. 257 et passim). Some literary works in which victims are killed into wax artworks include Jean Lorrain’s story *The Man Who Made Wax Heads* and Gustav Meyrink’s *The Wax-works* [*Wachsfigurenkabinett*].

<sup>7</sup> In the original: “bílý barbar”.

*You proud and white barbarian, lover of everything sick, pale,  
you dispassionate and yet fearful, noble madman,  
living on the left-over vital forces of virginal juices  
infected with hereditary atrophy,  
you symbol of decadence!*

(Hlaváček 1930, p. 46)

Dennison points out in his study that the decadent vampire often has “feral, atavistic characteristics” (Dennison 2001, p. 93), a description that applies well to Hlaváček’s vampire, whose atavism is indicated by his “sticky, rough tongue” (lep-kavý, drsný jazyk; Hlaváček 1930, p. 46).<sup>8</sup> He is not, however, a barbarian outside of and contrasting with a decadent persona, as in Verlaine’s *Languor*; instead, he is the decadent persona himself, who is slowly degenerating, moving down the evolutionary scale towards barbarism. The vampire’s evolutionary regression derives from his degenerate condition, which is the source not only of sickness, but also of inspiration. Hlaváček’s lyrical persona admires the ailing but “noble madman” (Hlaváček 1930, p. 46),<sup>9</sup> symbol of the decadent writer, haughty and in love with everything that is sick and decadent. He too soars the skies by night as a vampire, spreading contagion even as he enjoys the freedom of his spiritual flight and sexual exploits. In the last stanza he contrasts his nighttime adventures to his daytime awakening “in a quotidian parasite / that miserably drags out the day again in the profane noise of the street” (*ibid.*, p. 47).<sup>10</sup> He is part of the evil brotherhood of the undead, one of those decadent vampiric communities whose sucking of blood Dennison calls “a parody of communion” (Dennison 2001, p. 107).

Karásek’s 1894 poem *Metempsychosis*, published in his 1897 collection *Sexus Necans: A Pagan Book*, also combines the motifs of the barbarian and the vampire. In this poem the lyrical persona is sexually attracted to the barbarian, and he desires to rob him of his strength by vampirizing him. In the last stanza he addresses the barbarian:

*Divoká, prokletá zpíjí mne rozkoš,  
Zuřivá choutka ted' práskač můj cit:  
Vyrazit, vrhnout se na tvore tělo,  
Na tvore horké a smyslné tělo,  
Vysáti z retů tvých všechnu tvou krev,  
V šílenství zadusit v hrdle tvém dech,  
Rozlámat kosti a rezervat maso,  
Hnědé tvé, barbarské, surové maso.*

<sup>8</sup> The word I have translated here as “rough” is *drsný*, a constant epithet of the barbarian in Karásek’s works.

<sup>9</sup> In the original: “vznešený šílen[ec]”.

<sup>10</sup> In the original: “a procítá ve všedním parazitu, / jenž bídně provleče zase den v profanním hluku ulice”.

*A wild, cursed pleasure intoxicates me,  
 Furious lust now whips my passion on:  
 To rush forth, to throw myself on your body,  
 On your hot and sensual body,  
 To suck all of your blood from your lips,  
 To stifle the breath in your throat,  
 To break your bones and rip apart your flesh,  
 Your swarthy, cruel, barbarian flesh.*

(Karásek ze Lvovic 1995, p. 134)

The barbarian in this poem is the antithesis of the lyrical persona, whose degeneracy is evoked by the phrase “white body”, as in Hlaváček’s poem. The barbarian represents action, strength, and passion, and he is associated with blood, fire, and nature (earlier in the poem he is compared to a gale-wind).<sup>11</sup> He is the epitome of masculinity and cruelty, in accordance with the prevailing image of the barbarian in the decadent movement throughout Europe. At first the persona yearns for death by the barbarian’s spear, representing also sexual penetration, but then, inspired by the barbarian’s cruel example, he longs to vampirize the other, kill him, and tear him apart.<sup>12</sup> Vampirism appears to be the only means of defense left to the degenerate victim. Fresh blood will give him strength to subsist at least temporarily, but in taking that blood, he drains the hardy, healthy other and infects him, either with his own neurasthenic exhaustion, or perhaps with venereal disease, which is explicitly equated with vampirism in Hlaváček’s 1896 prose poem, *The Subtlety of Sorrow*.<sup>13</sup> The title of Karásek’s poem suggests that the power to attack the barbarian comes by metempsychosis, through the incorporation of the barbarian’s psyche into the persona’s own sick soul. At least momentarily, the persona takes on the barbarian attributes of cruelty, brutality, and passion. However, as suggested by the title of the collection containing these poems, *Sexus necans* (*Destroying Sex*), the violent and sexual coupling

<sup>11</sup> In an unpublished masters thesis on Karásek’s poetry, Karel Kolařík points out the contrast between the extreme manliness of the barbarian in this poem and the beautiful androgynous youths that also attract Karásek’s poetic and narrative personas (Kolařík 2005, p. 61 et passim). Discussing the collection *Sexus necans*, he also touches on the paradox of the decadent persona’s attraction to the force that will ultimately destroy him (*ibid.*, p. 92).

<sup>12</sup> Alfred Thomas offers a political reading of this poem, arguing that nineteenth-century Czech literature used heterosexual masochism and sadomasochistic relations between men and women to symbolize the position of the Czechs vis-à-vis their oppressors, and that Karásek transforms this tradition in *Metempsychosis* into a more subversive response characterized by homosexual sadomasochism. Discussing Hlaváček’s poem *The Vampire* as well as Karásek’s poetry, he astutely notes that “the identity of the modern poet is ambiguously male and female, sadistic and masochistic, elementally barbarian and inactive, vampirically artistic” (Thomas 1997, p. 180; totožnost moderního básníka je dvojsmyslně mužská a ženská, sadistická a masochistická, vitalisticky barbarská a nečinná, vampyricky umělecká).

<sup>13</sup> The main character of this story possesses “a vampiric nature after his father, who had died of venereal disease” (Hlaváček 1930, p. 40; vampýrskou povahu po svém otcu, který zemřel na venerickou nemoc).

of the two antagonists is doomed to be fatal to one or both of them. If the lyrical ‘I’ should survive, having torn the barbarian’s body to pieces, even with the soul of a barbarian he will not survive long “amidst barbaric carnage” with his sickly body. However, what he does gain by drinking the barbarian’s blood and taking over his soul is a source of poetic inspiration, if only short-lived. It is the only solution for the son of a degenerate race, as the poet portrays himself elsewhere. In the collection’s opening poem, *Io Triumphe!*, the lyrical voice describes his absorption of power from the barbarians, which courses through his body like blood sucked by a vampire:

*Do všech mých nervů stoupá zuřivost,  
Mé kosti prostupuje prudkých vášní proud,  
V mé svaly bije boje zběsilost.*

*Ferocity rises into my nerves.  
A stream of violent passions penetrates my bones.  
The frenzy of battle beats into my muscles.*

(Karásek ze Lvovic 1995, p. 123)

As he becomes intoxicated with the barbarians’ energy as with a drug, he finds inspiration to write the poems of this collection, his *Pagan Book*, imbued with sensuality and violence unusual for Karásek’s oeuvre, which usually expresses feelings of lassitude and exhaustion. Here, in contrast, concluding his programmatic introduction, he exclaims:

*Jak oře bodám vzpurné rytmus barbarské  
A v sloky pyšné házím, básník pohanský,  
Krev, barvy, bronz a slunce v plamenech!*

*I spur on restive barbarian rhythms like a steed  
And, a pagan poet, I proudly cast into verse  
Blood, colors, bronze and the sun in flames!*

(ibid., p. 123)

The passionate poetry of this collection is motivated only by the theft of barbarian energy, the sucking of barbarian blood; otherwise the decadent persona would be able to create nothing, having nothing left to say.

For Karásek, the vampire is associated not only with culture and inspiration, but also with Czech history. As in Hlaváček’s *Vampire* and his own *Metempsychosis*, Karásek again stylizes himself as a degenerate vampire in the 1895 poem *Spleen*, but here the emphasis is on the Czech past:

*Daufin starého, vzácného rodu, poslední jeho výhonek,  
Mám všechny nemoce svých předků a za všechny jich vášně,  
Chabý, vysát, bezkrevný potácím se jako stín v komnatách,  
Kam složili trofeje válečných svých slav a podoby žen, jež milovali.*

*Dauphin of an old, distinguished line, its last, late scion,  
 I have all the ailments of my ancestors and for all of their passions,  
 Feeble, drained, bloodless, I stagger like a ghost through the rooms  
 Where they stored the trophies of their military glory and portraits of the women  
 they'd loved.*

(Karásek ze Lvovic 1995, p. 74)

Establishing a link between contemporary degeneracy and a glorious past, this poem points forward to Procházka's manifesto of decadence published in the 1896 *Almanac of the Secession*. In this key theoretical statement, Procházka asserts that it is only natural for Czechs to feel they are decadent: they are brought up learning about their people's past glory, but in comparison the present seems petty, and Czechs are submissive and weak, unable to stand up to their Austrian oppressors. Karásek's *Spleen* reflects this sentiment: the lyrical persona is a nobleman who finds himself isolated in a world where nobility has died out and glory and passion are things of the past. He blames the passion and military exploits of his ancestors for his degenerate condition, in accordance with the decadent trope of inheritance of one's ancestors' sins, as well as consequences thereof, such as syphilis and madness. The persona describes himself as "drained" (*vysát*) and "bloodless", as though victimized by the vampire of his country's past history.

In my view, Karásek's 1897 sonnet *The Coming of the Barbarians*, which is modeled on Verlaine's *Languor*, has a similar national-historical subtext. In this poem the lyrical persona is engaging in tedious sexual activities with his slave as they impatiently wait for barbarians to bring down their empire, "calling for white flesh" as they pound on the doors with furious lust. The slave's lips are bloody, suggesting he has been sucking his master's blood like a vampire. This is one reason that the lyrical 'I' is so exhausted. As Dennison comments, the trope of vampirism frequently bears homosexual connotations (Dennison 2001, p. 6), and these are clear in this poem. The reader recognizes the persona as a degenerate not only because of his "white flesh" and debauchery, but also because he refers to himself and his people as "last sons of an exhausted race", a clear marker of decadence.

*The Coming of the Barbarians* is particularly interesting because it implicitly contrasts the barbarian and the vampire motifs as anti-imperial forces. Through the trope of vampirism Karásek emphasizes the internal forces of decline in the empire, which are the counterpart of the external forces of destruction, the barbarians. As the Czech critic Jan Váňa stresses in an 1893 article in the journal *Flowers* (*Květy*) on Edward Gibbon's *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, the Empire's fall was caused not only by invaders from beyond its borders, but also by exhaustion and apathy within. Váňa criticizes the historian for failing to realize that "Rome was destroyed not only by barbarian invasions, depopulation, and exploitation, but also by a general languor [*mdloba*] engendered by despotism" (Váňa 1893, p. 480).<sup>14</sup> Váňa surely had the contemporaneous Czech situation in mind when he wrote this critique

<sup>14</sup> In the original: "Nejen vpády barbarů vyvrátily Řím, vylidnění, vydírání, ale i všeobecná mdloba, zplozená despocií".

of Gibbon, as the Czech's lethargy, debility, and exhaustion resulting from long years of oppression were frequently highlighted by Czech journalists and writers throughout the 1890s and into the beginning of the twentieth century.

The view that the Czech nation has been vampirized is a recurring motif in Karásek's *œuvre*. Throughout his work, and notably in his most famous novel, *A Gothic Soul* (1900), Karásek portrays the city of Prague as a dead city peopled by vampires, the living dead, or ghosts from the past.<sup>15</sup> For Karásek, the Czechs have been robbed of life since they lost their independence to the Austrians in 1620. Karásek thus writes Prague into the symbolist myth of the dead city, on a par with the archetypal dead cities, Venice and Bruges. The Belgian artist Fernand Khnopff, for instance, painted a series of dead city images, including *Abandoned City* (1904). In literature, the seminal dead city novella was Georges Rodenbach's *Bruges-la-Morte* of 1892, the text of which was interspersed with photographs of the deserted city. The dead city appears also in Przybyszewski's *Androgynie* (1900), a short story in poetic prose, and, most famously, in Thomas Mann's novella *Death in Venice* (1912). Karásek creates a myth of Prague as a dead city, but she is a beautiful dead city, whose very tragedy removes her from reality and idealizes her.

For Karásek and Hlaváček, then, the vampire is both victim and passive aggressor. They pose as degenerates drained by civilization in general and the movement they represent in particular, and they infect others with the venom that has poisoned them. Although vampires are common in decadent works throughout Europe, this programmatic use of the vampire motif as the "symbol of decadence" is one of the distinguishing characteristics of Czech decadence. For Karásek, the vampire also represents the Czech nation, depleted, paradoxically, by its own great history, as well as by oppression. Indeed, the nation is so drained that it is no longer merely a nation of degenerates, but a nation of the undead. The only form of resistance left is vampirism; however, this line of defense proves self-defeating, as the nation poisons itself and depletes its own resources in its attempt to weaken the Empire from within — perhaps because after nearly three hundred years it is so integrally connected to Austria that it is difficult to separate oppressor from oppressed. Karásek's emphasis on the vampire as a symbol of both the moribund nation and its insidious potential to subvert the Empire, albeit at the risk of poisoning itself along with, or even in lieu of the oppressor, is also both central and unique to Czech decadence.

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## RESUMÉ / RÉSUMÉ

### Zákeřný jed úpadku: upíři v české dekadenci

Článek probírá upíry v literatuře české dekadence jakožto mnohoznačné symboly, současně reprezentující kulturu jakožto upírskou mocnost a dekadenci jakožto fenomén nákazy a jedu. Upíři mohou být též asociováni s homosexualitou, zvláště v díle Jiřího Karáska ze Lvovic. Představují také moc rakousko-uherské říše, která po staletí sála českou krev a učinila z Prahy „mrtvé město“, ale i odpor Čechů vůči své podřízenosti realizovaný jedovatou entropií, která není jen původce útisku, ale i samotné Čechy. V tomto smyslu jsou protějkem českých upírů barbaři, kteří říší ohrožují zvenčí

### The Insidious Poison of Degeneration: Vampires in Czech Decadence

The article examines vampires in Czech Decadent literature as polyvalent symbols that stand simultaneously for culture as a vampiric force and for decadence as a poisonous and infectious phenomenon. Vampires can also be associated with homosexuality, particularly in the work of Jiří Karásek ze Lvovic. In addition, they represent the power of the Austro-Hungarian Empire which had been draining the blood of Bohemia for centuries, leaving Prague a “dead city”, as well as the Czechs’ resistance to their subaltern status through a poisonous entropy that destroys not only the oppressors but also Czechs

themselves. As such, Czech vampires have their counterpart in barbarians, who threaten to destroy the empire from without.

#### **KLÍČOVÁ SLOVA / KEY WORDS**

česká dekadence; česká literatura; Jiří Karásek ze Lvovic; Karel Hlaváček; Moderní revue; vampíři; barbaři / Czech decadence, Czech literature, Jiří Karásek ze Lvovic, Karel Hlaváček, The Modern Revue, vampires, barbarians