



Malta  
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Association

# MELITA CLASSICA

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2016

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## Ferrying Nothingness: the Charon motif in Murnau's *Nosferatu* and Dreyer's *Vampyr*

*Saviour Catania\**

“The invisible is the real; the material only subserves its manifestation”.

*E. and H. Heron, The Story of Baelbrow*<sup>1</sup>

In a trenchant comment on *Nosferatu's* literary origin, Robin Wood intriguingly suggests that what attracted F.W. Murnau to *Dracula* was the fact that “[t]he vampire myth and Bram Stoker’s development of it easily coalesce with the Descent myth”.<sup>2</sup> What could have inspired Wood’s crucial connection is that Stoker labels *Dracula's* schooner “the *Demeter*” - a world which, as Evans Lansing Smith explains, recalls “[i]n Greek myth [...] the name of the mother of Persephone whose yearly abduction into Hades was re-enacted during the Classical Mysteries of Eleusis”.<sup>3</sup> Significantly, Wood develops his fascinating *Nosferatu* article in terms of the seminal parallel he draws between Hutter’s (Harker’s) and Persephone’s innocent ritual of flower gathering that initiates their tragic descent into what he calls “the terrible underworld”.<sup>4</sup> But this is only half the mythic point, for Wood oddly fails to mention that this *katabasis* or descent unleashes what may be termed a vampiric variation of the Charon myth in reverse. Like Stoker, in fact, whom Marinella Lorinczi rightly sees “structur[ing] tales of a mythological nature or fables [...] on the basis of reversal”,<sup>5</sup> Murnau refracts the classical Charon trajectory through a

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<sup>1</sup> E. Heron and H. Heron (1997), 257.

<sup>2</sup> R. Wood (1976), 6.

<sup>3</sup> E.L. Smith (1996), 243.

<sup>4</sup> R. Wood (1976), 4.

<sup>5</sup> M. Lorinczi (1998), 156.

vampiric glass inversely. The aesthetic potential of inverting Charon's *kátaxis* as the ferryman of the dead into that of a self-ferrying vampire's Lucianic ascent to the realm of the living can hardly be exaggerated.<sup>6</sup> For not only is Murnau's revising of this weird Stokerian concept the lifeblood of *Nosferatu*, but it is evidently Dreyer's weirder appropriation of it that makes *Vampyr*, his transgressive version of Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu's 'Carmilla', "the notable exception".<sup>7</sup> Wood sees to the exploitative debasement of most vampire films. *Vampyr* is indeed a variant of the Stoker/Murnau inversion of the Stygian vampiric descent upon which Le Fanu pivots the Carmilla/Laura lesbian relationship. But this statement can be viewed in truer perspective if we first analyse how Murnau moulds Nosferatu in terms of Stoker's Lucianic vision of Dracula as an ascending Charon figure that mutates into a Homeric bloodlusting shade, and then examine how Dreyer deepens Le Fanu's Stygian preoccupations through his stunning revision of the Stoker/Murnau synthesis of these mythic Hadean creatures.

Consider, for instance, the Vratna Pass sequence where Murnau imbues Hutter's initial sight of the incognito Count with an unmistakable echo of the Vergilian Charon's welcoming threat to Aeneas and the Cumaen Sibyl, "This is ghosts' land",<sup>8</sup> through the inter-title stating "And when he had crossed the bridge, the phantoms came to meet him".<sup>9</sup> Significantly, what looms in Hutter's eyes is the demon-driver Harker confronts at the Borgo Pass, for Nosferatu appropriates Dracula's posture as coachman. Again, Murnau follows Stoker in endowing his coachman with more than what Francis A. Sullivan labels Vergil's Charon's "touch of Etruscan grimness".<sup>10</sup> Nosferatu exhibits in fact Dracula's "aquiline nose,

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<sup>6</sup> Lucian, pp.78-96, inverts the traditional katabatic trajectory in *Charon sees life*.

<sup>7</sup> R. Wood (1976), 6.

<sup>8</sup> Vergil, A. 6. 392.

<sup>9</sup> My translation of *Et quand il eut dépassé le pont, les fantômes vinrent à sa rencontre*. This inter-title is taken from the French Cinémathèque copy of *Nosferatu*. See M. Bouvier and J.L. Leutrat (1981), 294.

<sup>10</sup> F.A. Sullivan (1950), 13.

[...] peculiarly sharp white teeth [and] extremely pointed ears”,<sup>11</sup> all of which are sinister features which the Etruscan Charun displays in ruined Tuscan tomb-scenes.<sup>12</sup> More crucially, however, Murnau slims *Nosferatu* to a skeletal version of *Dracula*, thereby physically accentuating his evocation of Charon as a ferrying death-demon. Admittedly, at the Vratna/Borgo Pass neither literally crosses hellish rivers. Still, Harker's carriage's jerky movements, it should be stressed, jolt him into an awareness of his watery descent: “the crazy coach rocked on its great leather springs, and swayed like a boat on a stormy sea”.<sup>13</sup> That *Dracula* is a Charonic entity is further suggested by the unease which he instils in Harker, and which the latter compares to “that chill” which allegedly strikes people dying “at the turn of the tide”.<sup>14</sup> Murnau creates indeed no visual analogy to Stoker's water imagery. He hints instead at *Nosferatu*'s Charonic nature by crowning his head not with *Dracula*'s “great black hat”,<sup>15</sup> but with a conical one that parallels the *pilos* Charon wears in fifth-century Athenian *lekythoi* painting.<sup>16</sup> But what initially clinches these coachmen's Charonic essence is their shared mission of displacing a living human being into Hades. Murnau's Stokerean concept of a Transylvanian Charonic journey is in this respect nothing but a Victorian-inspired Weimar variation on crucial aspects of the Homeric/Vergilian *katabasis*, even though no Homeric Charon ferries *Odysseus* to Hades. For Murnau, just like Stoker, etherealizes Vergil's cartography of Hades, thereby likewise rendering it more dreamily Homeric. True, in fact, to Nancy Thuleen's remark that “[t]he world of Hades for Homer is far more a dreamland, topologically undefined”,<sup>17</sup> both Stoker and Murnau distort Vergil's moonlight motif to create their respective analogy to a Homeric afterlife “shrouded in mist

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<sup>11</sup> B. Stoker (1970), 25.

<sup>12</sup> For a detailed description of the Etruscan Charun, see F.A. Sullivan (1950), 15.

<sup>13</sup> B. Stoker (1970), 12.

<sup>14</sup> B. Stoker (1970), 32.

<sup>15</sup> B. Stoker (1970), 17.

<sup>16</sup> Since Attic white *lekythoi* are oil flasks or vases whose contents were often used to anoint corpses, their images constitute a funerary art form.

<sup>17</sup> N. Thuleen (1992).

and cloud".<sup>18</sup> Significantly, while Vergil's Aeneas plunges his wary way into "Jove's shade" filtered through "a misty moon's deceiving ray",<sup>19</sup> what Stoker's Harker attains by "the moon sailing through the black clouds"<sup>20</sup> is a progression of eternal recurrence – a cyclic descent of "straight road[s] that takes the Charonic calèche "over and over the same ground again".<sup>21</sup> Seamus Heaney's definition of Homer's Land of the Dead as a "flickering elsewhere"<sup>22</sup> finds its equally oneiric parallel in what Clive Leatherdale calls the "dream-like unreality"<sup>23</sup> of Stoker's antithetical Hadean topography. More suggestively Homeric, however, is Hutter's Charonic trajectory which Murnau films in negative images that subvert Harker's Vergilian chiaroscuro *katabasis* into what Anna Powell labels "[a] reversal of light and darkness"<sup>24</sup> whose spectral paleness recalls the "blanching terror" that grips Odysseus in Hades.<sup>25</sup> The perfect anaemic realm, one would say, for Nosferatu who, like his "deathly pale"<sup>26</sup> Stokerean counterpart, displays the distinguishing trait of Homer's bloodless shades whom Artemis Leontis rightly describes as a "thirsty throng" lusting for Odysseus' "offering of dark blood".<sup>27</sup> Unlike the Homeric dead, however, who feast on sacrificial animals, these Charonic coachmen prefer to prey on living humans, even though Nosferatu shares none of Dracula's and his vampiric brides' penchant for baby blood, as Harker's reference to "the low wail, as of a half-smothered child"<sup>28</sup> chillingly reveals. Like Dracula,

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<sup>18</sup> Homer, *Od.* 11.

<sup>19</sup> Vergil, *A.* 6. 271-272.

<sup>20</sup> B. Stoker (1970), 19.

<sup>21</sup> B. Stoker (1970), 19.

<sup>22</sup> S. Heaney (1992), XX.

<sup>23</sup> C. Leatherdale (1985), 16.

<sup>24</sup> A. Powell (2005), 122.

<sup>25</sup> Homer, *Od.* 11. 48.

<sup>26</sup> B. Stoker (1970), 46.

<sup>27</sup> A. Leontis (1994), 272.

<sup>28</sup> B. Stoker (1970), 46.

however, *Nosferatu* is a Charonic undead whom only human blood can really animate.

*Nosferatu*'s vampiric attack on Hutter accrues in fact a pivotal thematic importance, for Murnau visualises it in terms of the perpetrator's shadow threatening its victim. This is a seminal moment in *Nosferatu*, for Murnau unexpectedly presents Stoker's Hadean bloodsucker as a stalking silhouette, thereby imbuing him with the dark double a vampire traditionally lacks. As Van Helsing claims, Dracula "throws no shadow [and] makes in the mirror no reflect",<sup>29</sup> thereby reaffirming the physical vacuity that astonishes Harker when he meets him as Charonic coachman: "when he stood between me and the flame he didn't obstruct it, for I could see its ghostly flicker all the same".<sup>30</sup> Dracula clearly shares more than bloodlust with Homer's shades, for the latter are equally nothing but insubstantial substance as Odysseus sadly discovers when he embraces his mother Anticlea's phantom:

Three times I rushed towards her, desperate to hold her,  
three times she fluttered through my fingers, sifting away  
like a shadow, dissolving like a dream.<sup>31</sup>

Hence Murnau's startling notion of endowing *Nosferatu* with a shadow so untypical of Victorian Gothic vampires. The crucial point here is that what Murnau recreates visually through *Nosferatu*'s shadow is precisely the disembodiment Dracula shares with Homer's bloodthirsty dead. For what *Nosferatu* as shadow paradoxically incarnates is the unholy hollowness he inherits from his shadowless equivalent. The Stoker/Murnau coachmen differ radically then from Vergil's ferryman who never looms as a Homeric blood-drinking shade nor, for that matter, as a disembodied denizen of the "vacuous realms, and regions void"<sup>32</sup> which Vergil appropriates from Homer's Hades. More crucially, however, both Stoker and Murnau rework the Vergilian Charon's journey by inverting

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<sup>29</sup> B. Stoker (1970), 242.

<sup>30</sup> B. Stoker (1970), 20.

<sup>31</sup> Homer, *Od.* 11. 235-237.

<sup>32</sup> Vergil, *A.* 6. 269.

it to what is arguably a vampiric version of Lucian's "Charon sees life",<sup>33</sup> a variant of his scathing *Dialogues of the dead*, where the ferryman ascends to earth to undercut human vanity in a satiric conversation with Hermes. Ronnie H. Terpening's belief that "the ferrying signals the finality of that passage, [its] inexorable finality"<sup>34</sup> is only partially accurate, for Lucian's Charon ferries himself back to the living world long before his Stoker/Murnau vampiric equivalents. But unlike Lucian's Charon, neither Dracula nor Nosferatu need "appl[y] to Aeacus for twenty-four hours shore-leave",<sup>35</sup> for as Charonic undead, constantly hovering between life and death, crossing in reverse is an instinctive act for them. Murnau actually reinforces Stoker's mythic vampirism by changing Nosferatu's ship's name to *Empusa*, for as Kevin Jackson rightly observes "*Empusa* [is] a Greek word for a kind of she-vampire, a goddess who feasts on blood."<sup>36</sup> Consequently, what the Dracula/Nosferatu voyage from Varna to Whitby (or Bremen) unleashes is anything but Lucian's sarcastic critic of humanity, for these Hadean emissaries embark on their Charonic odyssey as vampiric absent presences.

Nosferatu terrifies in fact the *Empusa* sailor by manifesting in the ship's hold as a Homeric/Vergilian entity through whose evanescence stacked coffins are clearly visible. But what really clinches the Homeric/Vergilian connection is the *Demeter* mate's violent reaction to Dracula's equally immaterial manifestation: "On the watch last night I saw It, like a man, tall and thin, and ghastly pale. It was in the bows, and looking out. I crept behind It, and gave It my knife, but the knife went through It, empty as the air".<sup>37</sup> The vampiric undead are evidently like Vergil's Homeric dead, for had Aeneas not heeded the Cumaen Sibyl's advice and struck their "shapes and shadows sweeping by/His stroke [would have] cloven in

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<sup>33</sup> See Lucian, pp. 78-96.

<sup>34</sup> R.H. Terpening (1985), 243.

<sup>35</sup> Lucian, p. 78.

<sup>36</sup> K. Jackson (2013), 71.

<sup>37</sup> B. Stoker (1970), 91.

vain the vacant air.”<sup>38</sup> Moulded from this Hadean nothingness, *Nosferatu* and *Dracula* are also plagued by their Homeric bloodthirst. Significantly, Murnau reworks Van Helsing’s vision of *Dracula* “com[ing] on moonlight rays as elemental dust”<sup>39</sup> into *Nosferatu*’s weirdly allegorised surrogate: the polyp that Professor Bulwer, the film’s non-crusading vampire expert, presents as evidence of a preying power that is paradoxically visibly invisible: “transparent [...] insubstantial [...] almost a phantom”.<sup>40</sup> Sharing the polyp’s insatiate instinct, these equally translucent counts literally become Charons of the vampiric kind by ruthlessly draining the ships’ captains and crew mates. Lurking at both helms is the “no one”<sup>41</sup> Olgaren stalks on the *Demeter* deck, or indeed the diaphanous wraith that scares the *Empusa* mate. Theirs is the supernatural steering that haunts the ghostly galleon in Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. What Devendra P. Varma claims in fact about the *Demeter* applies also to its filmic equivalent: “In its voyage from Varna to Whitby the *Material Ship* turns into a *Phantom Ship*”.<sup>42</sup> Significantly, Murnau captures the *Empusa* drifting in *contre-jour* or back-lit darkness, thereby hinting that the spectral captain’s silhouette has appropriated the vessel. If “Life is nothings!”,<sup>43</sup> as Van Helsing contends, so it seems is the undead state, for what these Charonic vampires ferry to Bremen and Whitby is their Hadean immaterial materiality. Murnau’s inverted *katabasis*, just like Stoker’s, is evidently a vampiric version of Odysseus’ *nostos* or homecoming, with Ellen/Mina longing, like a Bremen/Whitby Penelope, for the arrival of this Charonic absent presence at a seaside cemetery. Like Gabriel Fauré’s Pénélope, watching for Ulysse’s ship from a hill-top, Ellen and Mina are sea-gazers, but theirs is an empty seascape that mirrors the

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<sup>38</sup> Vergil, *A.* 6. 295-296.

<sup>39</sup> B. Stoker (1970), 242.

<sup>40</sup> My translation of “translucide, sans substance, à peu des chose près un fantôme”. This inter-title is taken from the French Cinémathèque copy of *Nosferatu*. See M. Bouvier and J.L. Leutrat (1981), 365.

<sup>41</sup> B. Stoker (1970), 89.

<sup>42</sup> D.P. Varma (1988), 211.

<sup>43</sup> B. Stoker (1970), 240.

vacuity of its Charonic *genius loci*. As Gilberto Perez says of Nosferatu's sightless self: "His presence is felt in the air",<sup>44</sup> much like Dracula's is in Whitby where old Swales draws Mina's attention to it in words of eerie poetry: "Look! Look! [...] There's something in that wind and in the hoast beyond that sounds, and looks, and tastes, and smells like death. It's in the air".<sup>45</sup> Haunting Murnau's beach cemetery is the Charonic *horror vacui* of Stoker's churchyard cliff at Whitby. Unlike Stoker, however, who refrains from plunging Mina into Dracula's nothingness, Murnau impels Ellen's descent into Nosferatu's hollowness. For Ellen falls prey to Nosferatu's swelling silhouette whose shadowy claw wrenches her heart apart in a macabre variation on Homer's detail about Penelope "feel[ing] her heart surrender" to Odysseus' presence.<sup>46</sup> If Murnau's is a "cinema of thin air",<sup>47</sup> as Perez claims, *Nosferatu* is a filmic meditation on ethereal negation. Murnau's *Nosferatu* recreates Stoker's *Dracula* by propelling it into what both film and text clearly anticipate: the Heideggerian/Sartrean vision of the nothingness of being. Significantly, Nosferatu, unlike Dracula who suffers a staking death, shatters with daybreak. This chiaroscuro conflict has a Lucianic resonance, for just as Lucian's Charon of the "nether darkness"<sup>48</sup> is blinded by Life's "dazzling light",<sup>49</sup> so does Nosferatu's shade flare into a dawning demise. Murnau could have hardly conceived a more elementally fitting finale for a Charonic vampire that thrives on the Hadean inversion of dark and light.

So does the Stygian undead that rears its Hadean head in *Vampyr's* Courtempierre, the realm with which Dreyer replaces Styria in his inspired revising of Le Fanu's *Carmilla*. Courtempierre becomes in fact this vampiric wraith's natural lair, for Dreyer filters it through what John

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<sup>44</sup> G. Perez (1993), 19.

<sup>45</sup> B. Stoker (1970), 81.

<sup>46</sup> Homer, *Od.* 23. 231.

<sup>47</sup> G. Perez (1993), 15.

<sup>48</sup> Lucian, p.78.

<sup>49</sup> Lucian, p.79.

Cutts lyrically describes as a “white ghost-night”,<sup>50</sup> thereby imbuing it with the anaemic texture of Murnau’s Charonic carriage sequence. The result is truly bizarre, for while evoking Vergil’s “crescent pale” Hades,<sup>51</sup> pallid Courtempierre becomes equally suggestive of its Homeric bloodless phantom. For Dreyer bleaches Courtempierre with the whiteness of Marguerite Chopin’s haunting hair – the whiteness which Gilles Deleuze rightly sees harbouring “a terrifying monstrous character”.<sup>52</sup> For Chopin is really the lethal Carmilla whom Dreyer reconceives as an ancient vampiress bereft of the former’s seductive beauty. At no time, in fact, does Chopin elegize her seduction of Léone as Carmilla does while stalking Laura’s heart: “But to die as lovers may – to die together, so that they may live together”.<sup>53</sup> Or again: “I live in your warm life, and you shall die – die, sweetly die – into mine”.<sup>54</sup> But while certainly lacking Carmilla’s elegiac charm, Chopin shares with her more than the “few points of correlation”<sup>55</sup> which Alison Peirse observes between Dreyer’s and Le Fanu’s female vampires. Consider, for instance, that startling sequence where, as David Rudkin claims, Chopin’s doctor seems to be “lead[ing] [her] physically out [from] the wall itself”,<sup>56</sup> or conversely from an inexistent doorway in the wall’s corner. But so does Carmilla’s proximity spectralize diegetic spatiality, for she likewise “laugh[s] at locksmiths” by traversing inapparent spaces much to Laura’s amazement: “As I stared at it, the figure appeared to have changed its place, and was now nearer the door; then close to it”.<sup>57</sup> More crucially, however, Carmilla’s vampiric fluidity is evidently of a Stygian origin. For Le Fanu, it should be stressed, predates Stoker by twenty-six years in envisaging vampiric mutation as a

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<sup>50</sup> J. Cutts (1960), 19.

<sup>51</sup> Vergil, *A.* 6. 466.

<sup>52</sup> G. Deleuze (1997), 113.

<sup>53</sup> J.S. Le Fanu (1995), 231.

<sup>54</sup> J.S. Le Fanu (1995), 225.

<sup>55</sup> A. Peirse (2008), 164.

<sup>56</sup> D. Rudkin (2005), 47.

<sup>57</sup> J.S. Le Fanu (1995), 237.

headlong plunge into Vergil's Charonic river. Laura's account of her initial transition as "the descent of Avernus"<sup>58</sup> is in fact clearly Vergilian. More evidently Charonic is Bertha's vampiric change which she compares to "the flow of an icy stream against her heart".<sup>59</sup> And Laura corroborates Bertha's aquatic feeling when she succumbs to Carmilla's feasting, for she too senses "that pleasant, peculiar cold thrill which we feel in bathing, when we move against the current of a river".<sup>60</sup> But Carmilla's vision is the most devastatingly Stygian, for she annihilates everything to vampiric liquefaction: "I see it all as divers see what is going on above them, through a medium, dense, rippling, but transparent".<sup>61</sup> Admittedly, nobody in *Vampyr* complains of a Stygian vampiric descent, for Dreyer deletes what the screenplay's Léone confesses to her sister Gisèle after Chopin's attack: "I am sinking deeper and deeper into the darkness".<sup>62</sup> But Dreyer stills swamps Chopin's victims into what Rudkin terms her "fluid-reality dimension".<sup>63</sup> For Dreyer perches Courtempierre on a coastal edge that crumbles into the Stygian hole of Le Fanu's forest *schloss*.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in David Gray's surveillance of a Scytheman being ferried across Courtempierre's river. This is *Vampyr*'s most explicit Charonic sequence, for as Michael J. Murphy observes, "[t]he scene is reminiscent of the Grim Reaper riding with Charon, the Ferryman of Hell".<sup>64</sup> Dreyer's screenplay substantiates this Ferryman's Vergilian nature by stating that what he navigates is "the river separating life and death".<sup>65</sup> Significantly, while Dreyer's Charon, unlike Vergil's, is not an antithetical daemon both vernal and ancient,<sup>66</sup> his Stygian navigation

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<sup>58</sup> J.S. Le Fanu (1995), 240.

<sup>59</sup> J.S. Le Fanu (1995), 259.

<sup>60</sup> J.S. Le Fanu (1995), 240.

<sup>61</sup> J.S. Le Fanu (1995), 236.

<sup>62</sup> C.T. Dreyer (1970), 102.

<sup>63</sup> D. Rudkin (2005), 52.

<sup>64</sup> M.J. Murphy (1979), 28.

<sup>65</sup> C.T. Dreyer (1970), 81.

<sup>66</sup> Vergil, *A.* 6. 305.

is more oxymoronically perplexing than his Vergilian counterpart's convoluted trajectory across the waters of the suicidal souls around whom "winds the sad, unlovely wave / of Styx: nine times it coils and interflows".<sup>67</sup> For Dreyer pivots the Gray/Scytheman interaction on an oxymoronic point-of-view syntax by shooting it, as David Bordwell astutely notes, "from the side opposite to that which Gray sees".<sup>68</sup> Rudkin concurs, adding that what this "irrational geometry" establishes is that we seem to be "see[ing] through two diametrically opposed perspectives".<sup>69</sup> Unlike Murnau's Charon, who inverts the Vergilian descent, Dreyer's Ferryman seems to be plying at cross purposes by conducting the iconic figure of Death concurrently away from and toward David Gray. What Dreyer's Charon uncannily accomplishes is therefore the crossing of no crossing, for he paradoxically indulges in constant static plying. The implication is that Courtempierre's is the river of no return on whose swell one can only drift to nowhere. In James Bell's words: "We're rarely sure of where we are, the camera floating unmoored around a nightmarish world of dancing shadows and sinister ferrymen".<sup>70</sup> Bell's sensation of buoyant drifting clinches Dreyer's camera's ferrying function. Like Courtempierre's Charon, however, it ferries nothing to nowhere. Gray's vision of his own live burial offers a stunning example. For Dreyer pivots the funeral sequence on a low-angled travelling shot through which we become at one with Gray's wide-open eyes staring through the coffin lid's glass pane as his / our dreamself drifts beneath the door lintel, the doctor's face, the pallid sky, the belfry tower, and the tree's overarching foliage. But this sustained trajectory leads to no burial, for the cortège dematerializes into nothing. Apparently, it is Gray's nowhere grave that the discarnate gravedigger's shadow inversely unmakes. Only through such immateriality does Courtempierre materialize, for unlike Riva's empirical bay into which Franz Kafka's living dead Gracchus sails through his ferryman's navigational mistake, Courtempierre is a realm that is not

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<sup>67</sup> Virgil, *A.* 6. 442-443.

<sup>68</sup> D. Bordwell (1981), 99.

<sup>69</sup> D. Rudkin (2005), 40.

<sup>70</sup> J. Bell (2013), 118.

there. Consequently, as Tom Milne aptly puts it, “David Gray touches - nothing”,<sup>71</sup> much as Aeneas does when, echoing Odysseus’ attempt to clasp his dead mother, he embraces his father Anchises’ shade:

Thrice would his arms in vain that shape enfold.  
Thrice from the touch of hand the vision fled,  
like wafted winds or likest hovering dreams.<sup>72</sup>

Like Vergil’s Homeric Hades, Dreyer’s Courtempierre is densely vacant.

More weirdly, however, Courtempierre’s Hadean nothingness transcends both death dreams and (un)dead states. It is literally everywhere. At one point, for instance, Dreyer’s camera starts panning rightward from the chateau nurse to capture the chatelain approaching Léone’s bed when, mystifyingly, the same nurse irrupts back into sight from off-frame right. Rather than the nurse “hav[ing] walked right behind the camera”,<sup>73</sup> as Rudkin suggests, the feeling Dreyer conveys is that his Charonic camera actually pans with the nurse traversing an elliptical terrain. As Bordwell cogently states: “We cannot firmly trust the space represented within the frame”.<sup>74</sup> Not content with having reworked the Stoker/Murnau appropriation of Le Fanu’s intermeshing of Homer’s vampiric Hades and Vergil’s Charonic *katabasis*, Dreyer imbues his Courtempierre underworld with what Paul Coates terms “the horror of imagelessness”.<sup>75</sup> Dreyer transmutes even Vergil’s “bay[ing] Cerberus”<sup>76</sup> and “sob[bing] babes”<sup>77</sup> into what Michel Chion would call “acousmêtres” or soundtrack “phantom[s]”<sup>78</sup> whose existence Chopin’s doctor negates much to Gray’s bewilderment: “There’s no child here, and no dogs

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<sup>71</sup> T. Milne (1971), 119.

<sup>72</sup> Vergil, A. 6. 711-713.

<sup>73</sup> D. Rudkin (2005), 49.

<sup>74</sup> D. Bordwell (1981), 103.

<sup>75</sup> P. Coates (1991), 102.

<sup>76</sup> Vergil, A. 6. 403-406.

<sup>77</sup> Vergil, A. 6. 426-427.

<sup>78</sup> M. Chion (1994), 128.

either".<sup>79</sup> The Stokerean Nothingness which Murnau ferries to Bremen manifests in Courtempierre as some kind of Bleached Invisiblity possibly greater than its vampiric incarnation. What Perez claims, in fact, about *Nosferatu*, that after the vampire's death "the substance of a hostile world is left intact",<sup>80</sup> is also applicable to *Vampyr* after Chopin's staking. For Chopin's white curse fails to cease with her, and it literally drowns her medical accomplice in the river mill-wheel's white flour. What Chopin leaves in her staked trail is the bloodless paleness of her Hadean self. Significantly, *Vampyr* ends with the Gray/Gisèle lake journey, another fluid trajectory that evokes, by its intimations of Böcklin's Charonic *Isle of the Dead*, the eerie Füssli *frisson* Dreyer reworks in his *Nightmare*-like tableau of Chopin vampirizing Léone. What makes *Vampyr* such a disturbing experience is its suggestion that whether we are (un)dead or not, it is always Stygian waters that we sail on. Consequently, just as Alain Resnais' *Marienbad* lovers can never transcend their living deadness, so do Gray and Gisèle descend into the nothingness within themselves. They are no more substantial than the white river mist into which they drift, or indeed the sunlight shimmering the bank they reach. Theirs is a Stygian destiny, like that of the doomed couple in Dreyer's short *They caught the ferry*. *Vampyr* liquefies life and death, sleep and wake, into a Hadean Nothingness that, like Derridean Spectrality, haunts humanity eternally: "always there [...] even if [it] does not exist, even if [it is] no longer, even if [it is] not yet".<sup>81</sup> Whether we ply Hadean waters from Styx Wharf or Margate Sands is therefore like trying, Eliot-like, to "connect nothing with nothing".<sup>82</sup> For what looms on either side is Charon's *air de néant*.

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<sup>79</sup> C.T. Dreyer (1970), 89.

<sup>80</sup> G. Perez (1967), 159.

<sup>81</sup> J. Derrida (1994), 176.

<sup>82</sup> T.S. Eliot (1961), 62.

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