

WHY DOES THE *RUSALKA* HAVE TO DIE?

THE CALL OF THE OTHER IN ZINAIDA GIPPIUS'S *SACRED BLOOD*

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ABSTRACT

Zinaida Gippius's play *Sacred Blood* (*Святая кровь*) dramatizes a young *rusalka*'s conversion to Christianity in her quest for an immortal soul. Through the *rusalka*'s encounter with a priest and his intolerant novice, *Sacred Blood* makes visible the rift not only between pagan and Christian worlds, but within the Christian Church itself. At the heart of the religious rift in *Sacred Blood* is whether and how to address "the other." In this paper, I propose to discuss Gippius's critique of exclusionary and abjectifying practices towards "the other" within the framework of biopolitics. Specifically, I propose to read Gippius's *rusalka* as a variant of Giorgio Agamben's abject figure of the *homo sacer*, the sacred and accursed human who according to ancient Roman law could be killed with impunity and who could not be sacrificed in religious rites, who in the modern state is consigned to 'bare life.' While Gippius's play presents the *rusalka* as a *homo sacer* figure and locates an exclusionary logic within Christianity, Gippius also presents a competing and salvific voice within Christianity. In *Sacred Blood*, the rationalist and legalistic discourse that negates, excludes and fragments is contrasted with a mystical, ecumenical, almost pantheistic, love-based theology.

KEYWORDS

Gippius, *rusalka*, *homo sacer*, biopolitics, the other, Agamben, Foucault, Lévinas.

POURQUOI LA *RUSALKA* DOIT-ELLE MOURIR ?

L'APPEL DE L'AUTRE DANS *LE SANG SACRÉ* DE ZINAIDA GIPPIUS

RÉSUMÉ¹

La pièce de théâtre de Zinaida Gippius, *Le Sang sacré* (*Святая кровь*), met en scène la conversion au christianisme d'une jeune *rusalka* dans sa quête d'immortalité. Sa rencontre avec un prêtre et son novice intolérant dévoile non seulement la division entre les mondes païen et chrétien, mais aussi celle qui existe à l'intérieur de l'Église chrétienne elle-même. Au cœur de ce désaccord religieux se trouve la question de l'altérité : Peut-on aborder « l'Autre » ? Comment s'y prendre ? Dans cet article, j'analyse la critique des pratiques d'exclusion et d'abjectification de « l'Autre » telle qu'élaborée par Gippius dans le cadre de la biopolitique. De manière plus exacte, mon travail consiste à interpréter la *rusalka* de Gippius comme variante de la figure abjecte de l'*homo sacer* que Giorgio Agamben décrit comme l'homme sacré et maudit qui, selon la loi romaine ancienne, pouvait être tué impunément, ne pouvait pas être sacrifié dans les rites religieux, et qui était relégué à « la vie nue » dans l'état moderne.

Bien que cette pièce de Gippius présente la *rusalka* comme figure de l'*homo sacer* et repère une logique d'exclusion au sein du christianisme, elle présente aussi une voix concurrente et salvifique. Dans *Le Sang sacré*, le discours rationaliste et légaliste qui nie, exclut, et fragmente est contrasté avec une théologie mystique, œcuménique, quasi panthéiste et fondée sur l'amour.

MOTS CLÉS

Gippius, *rusalka*, *homo sacer*, biopolitique, l'Autre, Agamben, Foucault, Lévinas.

¹ French translation from the original English version by Natalie Brenner.

1. INTRODUCTION

Gippius's play about a young water nymph's quest for an immortal Christian soul was first published in the *Northern Flowers* (*Severnnye tsvety*)² almanac in 1901. *Sacred Blood* remained unstaged during its author's lifetime;³ the play's emphasis on philosophical dialogue invites comparison with the closet drama, a genre that fittingly includes Goethe's *Faust*. *Sacred Blood* has been read as a mystery-play ("пьеса-мистерия") conveying neo-Christian ideas ("идей 'неохристианства'") (Nosova 2007); as an experimental tragedy set "within a folkloric context" that uses modernist distance manipulation techniques (Kot 1999: 49); as an "unwitting" and "unwilling" feminist statement (Schuler 1995: 131-47); and more recently by Frances Babbage as a revisioning of the *femme fatale* figure to express "Gippius's continued search for radical alternatives" (1999: 157) to "institutionalized Christianity" (1999: 158). Tatiana Osipovich reads the struggle of *Sacred Blood*'s *rusalka* as "the unique and difficult path of a gender misfit whom society perceives as subhuman" (2014: 2). Like Gippius herself, Tatiana argues, the "young *rusalka* rebels against the Church and society, which dehumanize and reject sexual misfits like her" (2014: 16)⁴. While Nosova, Schuler, Osipovich and others have addressed the theological conflict that swims at the heart of *Sacred Blood*, the biopolitical implications of this conflict remain to be explored.

In the historical trilogy *Christ and Antichrist* by Dmitry Merezhkovsky, Gippius's husband and intellectual collaborator, Jefferson Gatrall identifies "two sharply contrasting depictions" of Christ at play (Gatrall 2010: 145). In the first volume of his trilogy, the 1896 novel *Death of the Gods: Julian the*

² Note on Transliteration: When transliterating, I have employed the Library of Congress romanization system in the body of this text with some exceptions, rendering the ending *-ii* as *-y* and retaining alternately transliterated names of authors who have published their works in English. Alternate transliterations and Cyrillic script in quoted passages have also remained intact.

³ Tatiana Osipovich writes: "Gippius's play *Sacred Blood* was not staged until very recently. I have found only two small theaters (one in Canada and the other in Russia) that have staged this play" (2014: 1).

⁴ Osipovich argues that *Sacred Blood* embodies Gippius's struggle between her spiritual aspirations and a same-sex relationship she was having at the time (2014: 4). Though Osipovich focuses on biographical details, it is worth noting that the play's setting in and around a pond, its motif of reeds and paeans to same-sex camaraderie do lend themselves to comparison with "Calamus", a famously homosocial section of Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*. However, the homoerotic elements so plainly visible, for example, in Gippius's later *rusalka* poem "Ballad," are absent from *Sacred Blood*. Nevertheless, gender alienation as another dimension of the 'otherness' within *Sacred Blood* would be a promising area to explore, in connection with mechanisms of both biopolitical and disciplinary power.

Apostate —Smert' bogov (Julian Otstupnik)—, Merezhkovsky “exposes the equivocal testimony of early Christ images” (Gatrall 2010: 147). As a boy, Gatrall observes, the novel’s namesake “confronts examples of two very different Christ types: an Arian mosaic of an enthroned Christ and a sarcophagus bas-relief of the Good Shepherd” (Gatrall 2010: 148). While visiting an early Christian church near Constantinople, the future emperor Julian first looks “‘upward’” (Gatrall 2010: 145)⁵ and encounters the enthroned Christ above him:

The boy looked upward at an enormous, semi-circular mosaic between the columns of an arch: it was an Arian image of Christ—the dark, menacing, emaciated face had a long, thin nose, austere pursed lips, and a golden halo with a diadem like that of a Byzantine emperor. He blessed the world with his right hand, and in his left he held a book on which was written: “The world is yours. I am the light of the world.” He sat on a magnificent throne, and a Roman emperor—Constantius, it seemed to Julian—kissed his feet (Gatrall 2010: 145).

Julian then looks “down into ‘the semi-darkness’” (Gatrall 2010: 145) at a sarcophagus whose bas-relief depicts “‘the Good Shepherd carrying a sheep on his shoulders.... It was a joyful and simple barefooted youth, with a beardless face, humble and small, like the faces of poor peasants; he had a smile of quiet merriment’” (Gatrall 2010: 146). Just as Merezhkovsky “situates” within his novel “two incommensurable images of Christ from different historical periods in the same space” (Gatrall 2010: 151), Gippius places two incommensurable Christian voices in dialogue in the space of her play.

Gippius’s young *rusalka*, a quintessentially pagan figure, seeks acceptance and ultimately baptism by a sympathetic priest. Through the *rusalka*’s encounter with the kindly hermit Father Pafnuty⁶ and his rigid and intolerant novice Nikodim⁷ (a pair that recalls the Elder Zosima and his ascetic critic Father Ferapont of Dostoevsky’s *Brothers Karamazov*), *Sacred Blood* makes visible a rift within the Christian Church. At the heart of the religious rift in *Sacred Blood* is whether and how to address “the other,” be it pre-Christian beings, nature, feminine gender, or non-rational ways of knowing. Gippius’s

⁵ All quotes from Merezhkovsky’s novel (1896: 25-26) are translated by Gatrall (2010: 145-146).

⁶ Pafnuty’s name may be a reference to Hrotsvitha of Gandersheim’s medieval play *Paphnutius or The Conversion of the Harlot Thais*.

⁷ Nikodim’s name may be a reference to the apocryphal early Christian text, *The Gospel of Nicodemus*, which gives an account of Christ’s descent into Hell.

play gives form to the double rift through philosophical dialogue as well as through sensory details including smells and sounds. Gippius also embodies the rift by juxtaposing Christian songs and bell sounds with *rusalka* songs and melodies in an almost fugal, point-counterpoint structure throughout the play. This paper explores the play's theological debate, and draws connections between this debate and contemporary theorist Giorgio Agamben's notion of a *homo sacer*.

2. FROM *FEMME FATALE* TO NATIONALIST EMBLEM: THE *RUSALKA* IN LITERATURE

The *rusalka* is a pre-Christian, Slavic female nature spirit, sometimes described as “a Russian naiad” (Ivanits 1989: 64), who typically inhabits forested, inland waters such as lakes and rivers. While the *rusalka* “seems to belong primarily to the waters,” Linda Ivanits notes that she may also live in “the forest and fields” (1989: 64). Unlike the *domovoi*, or ‘house spirit,’ the *rusalka* and other nature spirits were considered “manifestations of the unclean [*nechist*] force” (Ivanits 1989: 64) associated with the devil. ‘*Rusalka*’ is usually translated as ‘water sprite’ or ‘water nymph,’ but the figure has sometimes been equated with a close Western European cousin, the half-woman and half-fish ocean dweller, the mermaid. The *rusalka* may also be related to the French *melusine* or *melusina*, a female water sprite with the lower body of a serpent or fish. Unlike the mermaid and *melusine*, however, the *rusalki* (plural of *rusalka*, in Russian) typically retained a humanoid form (subject to regional variation), and were associated with the unclean dead.

Whereas in “Northern Great Russia” the *rusalka* figure “tended to be older and unattractive with unnaturally large breasts and long, disheveled hair” (Ivanits 1989: 76), accounts emerge in “Southern Great Russia” and the Ukraine of “naked girls with long, flowing light-brown or green hair” and “pale-faced, ethereal beauties, sometimes in white shifts with garlands of flowers in their loose tresses” (Ivanits 1989: 75). Envisioned as “sisterhoods of lovely maidens in league with the unclean force” (Ivanits 1989: 76), the southern region's *rusalki* leave “their underwater homes to dance the *khorovod* (circle dance) and sing by the light of the moon and to entice and drown passing villagers,” or else sing and laugh as they drop from tree branches onto “unsuspecting victims” and tickle them to death (Ivanits 1989: 75). It is the sprightlier and more fatally alluring, siren-like *rusalka* who became immortalized in Russian literature (Ivanits 1989: 76), though Ivanits notes that “significant departures” from this image can be found in “popular tradition” (1989: 76). Gippius brings together *rusalki* from northern and southern regions in *Sacred Blood*, which features a young *rusalka* heroine, a

rusalka sisterhood singing by moonlight, and an old *rusalka*. Gippius's opening stage directions inflect the collective with a northern accent, casting them as “[a] swarm of pale, turbid nymphs”⁸ (Kot 1999: 55-56). The description invokes a turbid rather than an ethereal pallor and, in Joanna Kot's words, transforms “[t]he stereotypical beauty and delicacy of the nymph [...] into something sickly and not especially appealing” (Kot 1999: 55-56).

What unites the *rusalki* of the northern and southern regions, the literary *rusalka* and the *rusalki* found in peasant reports, is their “connection with the unclean dead” (Ivanits 1989: 76). The *rusalka* has a ghostly ontology. She has been variously described as the unclean spirit of a jilted lover or unwed mother who committed suicide, the spirit of a child who died without being baptised, or as a woman who died a violent death by the water. Ivanits notes Dmitry Zelenin's characterization of *rusalki* as unclean dead (1989: 77), together with their proclivity (within peasants' imagination) for drowning people (1989: 77). The “unclean dead” were considered harmful to “the living” and even rejected by “the earth:”

Dead sorcerers and witches belonged, along with suicides, victims of accidents, unbaptized children, and drunkards, to the unclean dead (*zalozhnye pokoiniki*). These dead were thought to be at the disposal of the unclean force, which used them to inflict harm on the living. Almost everywhere one encountered the phrase that “the earth did not accept” the “unclean dead” (Ivanits 1989: 120).

Inna Naroditskaya identifies the *rusalka* featured in one of Gogol's tales in *Evenings on a Farm Near Dikanka* (“*Mayskaia noch', ili Utoplennitsa*”) as a “*zalozhnaia*” (2012: 193), which she equates with a woman “prematurely dead from suicide” (2012: 191). Unlike her Western European cousins the mermaid and the *melusine*, who often “yearn to exchange their voices, hair, and kingdoms for human feelings,” the “half-magic and half-human” *rusalkas*, Naroditskaya observes, are “formerly mortal women inflamed by love and burned by betrayal” (2012: 191). The *zalozhnaia*, well as the broader category of the unclean dead (*zalozhnye pokoiniki*), are arguably uncanny figures, signalling a literal return of the repressed.

The *rusalka*'s magical aspect may be traceable to her paradoxical association with fertility spirits. Ivanits describes the nineteenth-century *rusalka*'s “complex and somewhat contradictory image” (1989: 78), which brings together fertility and death:

⁸ “Рой русалок, бледных, мутных” (Gippius 2000: 345).

On the one hand, they were perceived as dangerous and unclean, and thus capable of causing severe crop damage, illness, and death. [...] On the other hand, the association of the *rusalki* with water and the belief that where they frolicked the grass grew thicker indicate that the spirit was connected with spring vegetation (Ivanits 1989: 78-79).

Noting that “evidence for the term *rusalka* [d]ates only from the eighteenth century” (Ivanits 1989: 77), Ivanits cautions that “it is difficult to identify an ancient ancestor for the nineteenth-century *rusalka* or even to say for certain what the essential traits of this ancestor were” (Ivanits 1989: 78). Nevertheless, according to Ivanits “[a] number of scholars have suggested that the Russian *rusalka* of later belief is a composite image, resulting from [a] merger of spirits of life-giving moisture (*beregini[i]*) and the unclean dead” (Ivanits 1989: 78).

The *rusalka* figure’s relation to the human world is ambivalent, potentially playing a destructive or life-fostering role. “*Rusalka*’s complexity,” notes Naroditskaya in *Bewitching Russian Opera: the Tsarina from State to Stage*, “begins with her very name:”

One possible source of the word is *rusyi*, often the color of mermaid hair [...]. Dal’ suggests an etymological link between *rusyi* and *ruski* (Russian) [...]. Thus the word *rusalka* relates to Rus’, the old name for Russia, and also to the archaic singular noun for a Russian person (*rus*). Some associate *rusalka* with *ruslo* (riverbed). [T]he term is also linked to pre-Christian rituals called *rusalii*, which included celebrations, offerings, and exorcisms intended to remove the powers of a *zalozhnaia* woman [...] (Naroditskaya 2012: 191).

Rusalki have been depicted in literature as mischievous and sexy water sprites who amuse themselves by luring men to watery deaths, and as more mermaid-like figures who leave the water to find love and acceptance from a human male (typically a prince or a knight) only to be tragically betrayed or abandoned. Pushkin’s unfinished 1832 verse tragedy (posthumously titled *Rusalka*) features a young woman who becomes a *rusalka* after being abandoned by her princely lover and committing suicide. Conversely, prior to the play Pushkin wrote a poem entitled “*Rusalka*” in which a siren-like *rusalka* lures an old priest to his death. Pushkin’s “*Rusalka*” poem frames the destructive force of female sexuality within a tale of pagan and Christian realms colliding. Just as the *rusalka* entices the priest into the lake, the poem itself pulls the Christian ‘saint’s life’ genre into the alien waters of a pagan myth. The journey of a mind into God is abruptly ended at the banks of a misty lake.

While, as Naroditskaya puts it, “*Rusalka*’s paganism pitted her against Russian Orthodoxy” in Pushkin’s poem, Alexander Dargomyzhsky’s *Rusalka*

opera would subdue the *rusalka*'s subversive potential by subjecting her to “a nineteenth-century European gender paradigm” (Naroditskaya 2012: 211). A number of *rusalka* heroines would be “destroyed” by Dargomyzhsky and other “nationalistic” nineteenth-century Russian operatic composers attracted by the *rusalka*'s versatile topoi (Naroditskaya 2012: 211):

[The *rusalka*'s] ability to draw on Western European, Slavic, and Russian mythologies and to mediate between folk and classical literatures made her a potent image for nineteenth-century artists searching for a nationalist narrative. At the same time, her sensuality unleashed the male sexual imagination [...] (Naroditskaya 2012: 192).

Naroditskaya describes Rimsky-Korsakov's destruction of the central hero's two wives, “the water spouse Tsarevna Volkhova and a mortal wife Liubava,” in *Sadko*:

Liubava spills rivers of tears throughout the opera; at the end the Tsarevna Volkhova turns herself into a river, benefiting Sadko and his city. This submission of women is celebrated in the finale of the opera by a massive choir glorifying the hero and the nation (Naroditskaya 2012: 211).

The *rusalka*'s life-fostering role in fertility rites, the power associated with her ghostly persistence after an untimely death, and her riparian locale converge to make her “an emblem useful in creating a nationalistic mythology”:

As a folk-tale heroine, she was closely associated with ancient rituals, and her image as *zalozhnaia* endowed her with spiritual power. Living in various waters—from the Dnieper (*rusalkas* in Somov and Gogol), the Dniestr, and the Volkhova (Rimsky-Korsakov, *Sadko*) to the Aragva and the Kura in the Caucasus (Lermontov, *Mtsyri*) and the Bashkirian lake Aculu (Dal, “Bashkiriskaia *Rusalka*”)—the Russian *rusalka* served as a territorial marker of Russian imperialism and embodied a broad pan-Slavic identity (Naroditskaya 2012: 211).

Both sacred and accursed, agent of fertility and rejected by the earth, the *rusalka* is perhaps the quintessential *homo sacer*, the sacred and accursed figure whose inclusion in the polis is (according to Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben) paradoxically its very exclusion. The *rusalka*'s ambivalent and sacrificial role as foundational figure in the mythology of nationalism reflects the transformation of female subjectivity in the nineteenth century (Naroditskaya 2012: 211). Naroditskaya quotes Meyda Yeğenoğlu, who “argues that in different times and cultural contexts a woman ‘becomes the ground upon which nationalism builds its discourse’” (Naroditskaya 1998: 211). Naroditskaya marks the *rusalka*'s telling passage from “formidable

woman” to “singing and dancing” creature, from folkloric symbol of female power to modern masculinist fantasies of empire and sexual conquest:

The figure of *rusalka*, repeatedly invoked in Russian literary works from the late eighteenth century and into the second half of the nineteenth, shows the transformation of discourse about women and power—discourse that converges the processes of continuous Westernization, masculinization, and rising nationalistic extremism. Once a formidable woman, a threat to men’s physical existence and memory, *Rusalka* was turned into a magical otherworldly creature whose singing and dancing codified her sexual and social challenge for the Russian romantic man (Naroditskaya 2012: 212).

3. SACRED BLOOD AS CRITIQUE OF BIOPOLITICS

Gippius ironically deploys the politically charged *rusalka* figure to subvert the biopolitical logic that supports the modern discourse of nationalism. Defying traditional depictions of the *rusalka* as wanton, mischievous and even deadly, Gippius’s version of the *rusalka* figure is endowed with Christian virtues of sexual innocence and self-sacrificing love. *Sacred Blood* simultaneously invites and subverts the common myth of the *rusalka* as deadly temptress of masculine subjects. Gippius’s young *rusalochka* unintentionally inspires erotic feelings in a monk, but might best be characterized as an aspiring child bride of Christ. Nicknamed “little fish” (“рыбка”) by the witch who advises her in *Sacred Blood* but able to get around on land, Gippius’s *rusalka* combines elements of the Western mermaid figure with the pan-Slavic water nymph figure.

Against the Heisenberg-like trope of *rusalka* as both fertility-fostering temptress and ghost of a suicide or murder victim, inhabitant of a liminal zone between alive and dead, Gippius’s *rusalka* is alive and wants very much to continue living. She is alive, however, in a relatively diminished sense. While in Gippius’s play the *rusalochka* and her previously immortal kind are neither ghosts nor murder victims, they have nevertheless been consigned to die—that others may be made to live. “[H]e, this Man, or, how did you say it, “God”—brought us death, but them life?,” asks the little *rusalka* (*rusalochka*) at the story’s beginning. “Why do we have to die because of His blood?” (Gippius 2000: 8). This question runs through every vein of *Sacred Blood*; Gippius’s play can in fact be read as an elaboration and intensification of this question.

The logic of making one population live eternally while letting another population die anticipates the paradoxical logic of biopolitics that would be identified by Foucault and elaborated on by Agamben and others almost a hundred years later. According to the logic of biopolitics, writes Stuart

Murray, “[d]eath becomes a consequence—a necessary part—of living” (Murray 2008: 204). So that “‘we’ may live, live well and live fully, ‘they’ must die, the distinction being between the virtuous citizen and the other excluded as bare life, disposable life” (Murray 2008: 204-5). Murray refers here to Agamben’s distinction between the “virtuous citizen” and the “*homo sacer*,” the individual reduced to bare, disposable life, whom it is not a crime to murder. “Nobody is killed, at least not directly,” writes Murray, “and nobody’s hands are bloodied, at least not that we can see; the crimes are outsourced to penal colonies, through “extraordinary rendition” become ordinary [...]” (Murray 2008: 204). Murray continues: “These deaths are never ‘caused’ as such; officially, they are merely ‘allowed,’ a passive event, collateral damage. But biopolitical logic requires them” (2008: 204). While no *rusalka* is murdered in *Sacred Blood*, the immortality of the *rusalki* and other pagan deities was taken from them collectively, as collateral damage for the increase in human longevity. Gippius’ untimely play thus anticipates biopolitics’ exclusionary economy of making live and letting die.

Gippius’s depiction of the *rusalka*’s quasi-Darwinian relationship with humans engages the modern biopolitical discourse of human sciences, and places her play at the borders of *nauchnaia fantastika*, which Anandita Banerjee translates as “scientific fantasy” (Banerjee 2012: 1). Banerjee writes:

Science fiction emerged as an early platform for articulating a connection between the anxiety surrounding Darwinism and those concerning the rational model of the human based on the Cartesian duality between the body and the soul (Banerjee 2012: 121).

According to Banerjee, during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century in Russia “science fiction soon became a principal medium for envisioning how science and technology, the very instruments of modernity, could be appropriated for resisting biopower” (Banerjee 2012: 122). *Sacred Blood* addresses, not the technological means of wielding power over life and life as power (what Foucault terms “biopower”), but the justifying religious and philosophical framework for those institutional and regulatory forces that wield biopower (“biopolitics”). Specifically, Gippius’s exploration of a *rusalka* population that has to die while the human race achieves immortality evokes a discourse that, along with other “disciplining knowledges,”⁹ underwrote the biopolitical mechanisms of what Foucault would identify as a new kind of racism.

⁹ The term “disciplining knowledges” is used in the list of February 25, 1976 lecture topics in Foucault, *Society Must be Defended*, 168.

4. STATE RACISM, BLOOD AND THE UNCLEAN

“At the end of the nineteenth century,” observes Foucault, “we see the appearance of what might be called State racism, of a biological and centralized racism” (2003: 82). According to Foucault, racism performs two primary functions within the modern State: first, it separates “what must live” from “what must die” (2003: 254). Racism establishes a “hierarchy of races,” in which “certain races are described as good” and others as “inferior” (Foucault 2003: 255). According to Foucault, “[i]n a normalizing society, race or racism is the precondition that makes killing acceptable” (2003: 256). A second function of racism within the modern State, according to Foucault, is to enable “a relationship between my life and the death of the other”:

“The more inferior species die out, the more abnormal individuals are eliminated, the fewer degenerates there will be in the species as a whole, and the more I—as species rather than individual—can live, the stronger I will be, the more vigorous I will be. I will be able to proliferate.” The fact that the other dies does not mean simply that I live in the sense that his death guarantees my safety; the death of the other, the death of the bad race, of the inferior race (or the degenerate, or the abnormal) is something that will make life in general healthier: healthier and purer (Foucault 2003: 255).

Within the second function of racism “the other” needs to die, not to ensure that certain individuals are safe, but to “make life in general [h]ealthier and purer,” and thereby improve the overall vigor of the human species. Normalization, within both functions of racism, entails positing and killing “the other,” framed as the “abnormal,” the “inferior.”

In *Sacred Blood*, three main justifications for the *rusalki*'s radically diminished life spans are posited and, I will argue, undermined: 1) *rusalki* do not have human blood; 2) *rusalki* are unclean and impure; and 3) *rusalki* are too close to nature. These justifications are both given voice and resisted within a framework of Christianity. While these justifications do not directly equate with state racism as delineated by Foucault, they may be seen as precursors to the full-fledged racism of biopolitics. If we hear premonitory echos of state racism, we also hear the call of “the other” in Gippius's play about a sentient, very human-like little *rusalka* girl whose life span has been diminished due to her species' inferior blood, purported uncleanliness and proximity to nature.

The first answer we hear in *Sacred Blood* to the young *rusalochka*'s question “Why do the *rusalkas* have to die?” is offered by an elderly *rusalka*: “Blood for blood. We don't have blood” (Gippius 2000: 8). Instead of blood, water runs through *rusalki*'s veins. Bringing death to a class of sentient beings

solely on the basis of what runs through their veins is disturbingly in accord with racism based on biological purity. From a theological perspective, the old *rusalka*'s response both echoes and profoundly distorts the calls for reciprocal justice found in the Pentateuch, e.g., “eye for eye, tooth for tooth” in Exodus 21: 23-24¹⁰ (*Harper Collins Study Bible* 2006: 120), and strikes a dissonant chord with the advisement against retaliation expressed in Matthew 5:38-39: “You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ [B]ut I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also” (*Harper Collins Study Bible* 2006: 1677). “Blood for blood” is at odds with Christ’s message of grace and mercy as well as with his transubstantiatory powers. The strict, almost tautological equation of “blood for blood” given voice by the old *rusalka* also flagrantly clashes with the holy trinity’s dynamic resistance to precise and reductive numerical equivalents (the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost are distinct hypostases included as such in the One). Gippius’s text both proffers the old *rusalka*’s answer of “blood for blood” and undermines it. The Christ initially described by the old *rusalka* brings eternal life only to those with the right kind of blood and takes it away from others, yet the Christ invoked by the phrase “blood for blood” (the Christ of Matthew 5:38-48) calls the old *rusalka*’s Christ into question. Christianity as presented in *Sacred Blood* thus both underwrites and resists racist logic.

A second, even less convincing answer is provided by the witch who, in the third scene, advises the *rusalochka*: “Hold on, you little fool. Kind or not, they won’t baptize you. To them you are—unclean” (Gippius 2000: 13). *Rusalki* are considered *nechist’*—unclean, impure, in flesh and spirit. Father Nikodim embodies the view that dismisses *rusalki* as “unclean creatures.” Nikodim voices a circular logic in which *rusalki* were rejected by God because they are unclean, and are now considered unclean because they were “rejected by the Lord”:

NIKODIM. [W]ho dares take in one rejected by the Lord? Or did He not know what He was doing when He brought men life and sent the unclean creatures into the darkness? How can we transgress heavenly laws? Would you really dare to baptize a cur? Even a cur is more pure than the issue of Satan marked with death by the Lord Himself. Do you know what the holy books say about that? (Gippius 2000: 28)

Nikodim even goes so far as to exorcise the *rusalka*:

¹⁰ See also Leviticus 24:20 and Deuteronomy 19:21.

NIKODIM. In the name of the One Heavenly King, who died for us on the cross and was resurrected on the third day, I adjure you, creation of the enemy, depart from this place. You were unworthy of the Lord in flesh and in spirit ... It is not for us, His servants, to judge and correct His deeds (Gippius 2000: 29).

While Gippius locates the racist logic of spiritual hygiene within Christianity, voicing it through the ascetic Father Nikodim, her play also locates resistance to this very logic in the person of Father Pafnuty. An extremely mortified Father Pafnuty intervenes and prevents Nikodim from casting out the *rusalochka*; he turns the tables on Nikodim and sends him outside, compelling him to participate in his own (momentary) exorcism:

FR. PAFNUTY (rising). [G]o. In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. NIKODIM (after a silence, with effort). Amen. (He exits slowly, without taking his eyes from the YOUNG MERMAID, who is trembling. FR. PAFNUTY follows him out with his eyes [...]) (Gippius 2000: 29).

In the course of the play, Pafnuty defends the childlike purity of the *rusalochka* and of her songs which themselves celebrate purity—“We’re the radiant lake’s white daughters, born of its purity and cool” (Gippius 2000: 5). Not only are the radiant lake’s white daughters born of purity; they resemble the moon, whose purity is also celebrated:

We know the quiet moon.
Damp, sweet, meek, pure,
golden on a silver night,
she’s kind, like a mermaid ... (Gippius 2000: 6).

Joining the chorus of Father Pafnuty and the *rusalki*, Gippius’s narrative undermines Nikodim’s dismissal of the *rusalochka* as unclean. Not only does *Sacred Blood* feature a sexually innocent little girl, who is referred to as a “*rusalochka*” (a diminutive form of “*rusalka*”); the play conversely gives Nikodim himself impure thoughts about the little girl.

FR. PAFNUTY. Alive! A living girl, Nikodim! You nearly killed a child! She’s barely breathing. She’s awfully cold. But a girl, a girl! [W]hat came over you? Were you half asleep? NIKODIM (flatly). I was tempted (Gippius 2000: 15).

Nikodim’s attribution of uncleanliness to the *rusalka* because of his own sexual feelings towards her, and the violence he does to her when he wakes up next to her, highlights the rejection of the feminine that informs the rejection of the *rusalka*. Conversely, the *rusalki*’s physical cleanliness, constantly bathing in their fresh water lake—“God’s water,” in Father Pafnuty’s words

(Gippius 2000: 20)—also works against the notion that they are “unclean.” Finally, as part fish the *rusalki* literally embody Tertullian’s pun on Christ as *ICHTHYS* in his treatise *On Baptism*: “we, little fishes, after the example of our *ΙΧΘΥΣ* Jesus Christ, are born in water” (1989:1487). Tertullian’s pun plays on the ‘Jesus Fish’ originating from *ΙΧΘΥΣ* (“*ICHTHYS*”), a Greek acronym of an early Christian phrase referring to Christ: “*Ἰησοῦς Χριστός, Θεοῦ Υἱός, Σωτήρ*” (*Iēsous Christos, Theou Yios, Sōtēr*). Augustine of Hippo expounded on the acronym’s symbolism roughly two centuries later, in *The City of God*:

[I]f you join together the initial letters of those five Greek words, ‘*Ἰησοῦς Χριστός, Θεοῦ Υἱός, Σωτήρ*’ which mean “Jesus Christ the Son of God, the Savior,” they will make *ΙΧΘΥΣ*, that is, “fish,” in which word Christ is mystically understood, because He was able to live, that is, to exist, without sin in the abyss of this mortality as in the depth of waters (Augustine 1872: 243).

In *Sacred Blood* the witch’s nickname for the *rusalochka*, “little fishie,” echoes Tertullian’s reference to the followers of Christ as “little fishes” who are “born in water.”¹¹ The ichthyoid nature of Gippius’s *rusalka*, together with her watery habitat, also evoke Augustine of Hippo’s figurative reading of fish as embodying the Christ-like trait of living without sin. While no argument is explicitly made against the characterization of *rusalki* as unclean, *Sacred Blood* offers a cornucopia of lyrical evidence for their physical and spiritual purity.¹²

Gippius’s play might be criticized for morally affirming the problematic unclean/pure distinction, leaving it intact; nevertheless, it could also be argued that *Sacred Blood* simultaneously subverts the very concepts of cleanliness and purity by endowing *rusalki* with these attributes. The *rusalki*’s hybrid identity in *Sacred Blood* as part human, part fish may contribute to their dismissal as “unclean.” Gippius’s *rusalki* muddy the waters when it comes to neat distinctions between humans and beasts—the half fish half human being destabilizes the biblical privileging of humans above beasts, of the kingdom of God above nature, of the soul above the flesh. The mermaid-*rusalka* hybrids in Gippius’s play are ichtheous female counterparts to the

¹¹ The Christ types that Merezkhovsky places on the sarcophagus confronting the young hero of *Julian the Apostate* include a shepherd youth, “Orpheus, Moses, Jonah and the Whale, the Dove, and the Fish” (Gatrall 2010: 150, citing Merezkhovsky 1989: 26).

¹² Gatrall notes in *Alter Icons* that the 1896 Moscow exhibition of early Roman and Byzantine images of Christ “marginalize[d]” those figures with a more “pagan’ appearance,” e.g., “the grapevine” and “the fish symbol” (Gatrall 2010: 148).

half-goat male Pan, who has been re-cast as the devil in Christian lore. Moreover, the bodies of *Sacred Blood's rusalki* are lighter than human bodies, seamlessly blending human with beast, spirit with flesh, ethereal with material. When *rusalki* were immortal, they remained whole. Humans are unblended—their bodies are heavy with flesh and blood; their immortal souls are distinct from their bodies and must separate altogether from the body which perishes. *Rusalki* resist the dualist, ascetic strain of Christianity represented by Nikodim; their in-betweenness resists this ascetic strain which both posits and privileges soul over body, and which preaches castigation of the carnal realm which nature represents. The *rusalka's* incarnation in *Sacred Blood* allows Gippius, in Jenifer Presto's words, "to address the relationship between the body and the sacred" (Presto 2008: 302), but not to resolve it.

As hybrid beings, the *rusalki* in *Sacred Blood* also bear a resemblance to the figure of the *homo sacer* as it appeared in ancient Germanic law—"the *wargus*, the wolf-man, and [t]he *Friedlos*, the "man without peace" (Agamben 1998: 63) who was banned from the city. According to Agamben, this 'bandit' could be killed with impunity, and was considered already dead:

What had to remain in the collective unconscious as a monstrous hybrid of human and animal, divided between the forest and the city — the werewolf — is, therefore, in its origin the figure of the man who has been banned from the city. That such a man is defined as a wolf-man and not simply as a wolf [i]s decisive here. The life of the bandit, like that of the sacred man, is not a piece of animal nature without any relation to law and the city. It is, rather, a threshold of indistinction and of passage between animal and man, *physis* and *nomos*, exclusion and inclusion: the life of the bandit is the life of the *loup garou*, the werewolf, who is precisely *neither man nor beast*, and who dwells paradoxically within both while belonging to neither (Agamben 1998: 63).

Like the wolf-man figure, the amphibious hybrid *rusalka* exists at the fluid border between animal and human, matter and spirit, living and the dead. By endowing these hybrid beings with cleanliness and purity, Gippius's play calls into question the ascetic economy of sacrifice which privileges soul over body and creates an Other that must be sacrificed and rendered abject.

5. SAVAGE NATURE

[R]ather than asking ideal subjects what part of themselves or their powers they have surrendered in order to let themselves become subjects, we have to look at how relations of subjugation can manufacture subjects (Foucault 1976: 265).

Achille Mbembe warns in his essay “Necropolitics” that the technologies of racism “find their first testing ground in the colonial world.” Citing “the selection of races, the prohibition of mixed marriages, forced sterilization, even the extermination of vanquished peoples” that take place within plantation systems, Mbembe writes: “What one witnesses in World War II is the extension to the “civilized” peoples of Europe of the methods previously reserved for the “savages” (Mbembe 2003: 23). Whereas wartime occupations represent a suspension of the judicial order, according to Mbembe a permanent state of exception—“absolute lawlessness”—exists at sites of colonial occupation. Violence is sanctioned, based on “the racial denial of any common bond between the conqueror and the native” (Mbembe 2003: 24). “In the eyes of the conqueror,” Mbembe writes, “savage life is just another form of animal life, a horrifying experience, something alien beyond imagination or comprehension” (Mbembe 2003: 24). The savage’s status as non-human stems from a perceived intimacy with nature. Citing Hannah Arendt’s *Origins of Totalitarianism*, Mbembe writes:

‘[A]ccording to Arendt, what makes the savages different from other human beings is less the color of their skin than the fear that they behave like a part of nature, that they treat nature as their undisputed master. Nature thus remains, in all its majesty, an overwhelming reality compared to which they appear to be phantoms, unreal and ghostlike. The savages are, as it were, “natural” human beings who lack the specifically human character, the specifically human reality, “so that when European men massacred them they somehow were not aware that they had committed murder.”¹³

Dismissed by Nikodim as a “phantasm” and condemned for her love of nature, Gippius’s *rusalka* may be seen as a “savage” figure in the sense that Mbembe has articulated. Besides their lack of blood and their purported uncleanliness, the *rusalki* en masse “have to die” due to their love of nature. Through the *rusalka*’s treatment within *Sacred Blood*, Gippius explores a dehumanizing fear of nature which she posits as present within Christianity.

Horrified when he sees Pafnuty wearing a wreath of flowers, Nikodim espouses the view that the *rusalki*’s nature-loving activities—their sensual worship of flowers, their constant swimming in the lake and their ‘festival tunes’ to their brothers and sisters “shaggy and bare”—are sinful and idolatrous. Pafnuty, on the other hand, calls the flowers gathered by the *rusalochka* “God’s little flowers” (Gippius 2000: 22-23) and allows her to

¹³ Hannah Arendt, in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harvest, 1966), 192, quoted in Mbembe, “Necropolitics,” 24.

“adorn” him with her freshly picked wreath. Pafnuty takes unabashed visceral pleasure in the flowers and the mud the *rusalochka* brings to him:

YOUNG MERMAID. You said yourself—they're God's flowers. Look, how wonderful! With the flowers, you're like one of my own! And your skull cap is visible. The water lilies are along the edge of it. Can you smell them?

FR. PAFNUTY. It smells of water and mud. Hmm, it smells good (Gippius 2000: 23).

Pafnuty offers inclusive paeans to nature throughout the play, in lyrical language reminiscent of Francis of Assisi's “Praise of the Creatures” (“*Laudes Creaturarum*”):

Do you think a lark in the heavens does not pray to the Creator? You know how sonorously and cheerfully its songs pour forth. All earthly voices are praise to God (Gippius 2000: 18).

Perhaps you know better, perhaps it's a sin, but my heart simply loves the sun, and the water, and the tiny blade of grass, and the Lord God, Who created all, to Him Alone belongs eternal praise (Gippius 2000: 21).

While Nikodim seeks knowledge of God through books, Pafnuty simply listens to blades of grass rise from the earth and thinks joyfully about life's Creator:

The Lord in his wisdom is revealed to him he reads the holy books, every word of God is known to him. Whereas I praise my God simply. Blades of grass rise from the earth, I listen and rejoice in life, and think about the Creator. Perhaps the Lord will forgive me my simplicity (Gippius 2000: 19).

Nikodim may zealously know every word of God, but Pafnuty celebrates and loves God's children—including the *rusalochka*:

She's a child of God. She lives like a blade of grass and rejoices in the stars and the water. Is she that awful? She's no ordinary person (Gippius 2000: 21).

Nikodim counters, “Perhaps she's not a person at all” (Gippius 2000: 21). By the time Nikodim utters this speculation, his words have a heartless and unethical ring. The radical separation of nature from humanity and from God—nature as alien Other—rings false in the wake of Pafnuty's loving odes to the Creator's blades of grass.

“The fundamental categorial pair of Western politics is not that of friend/enemy,” writes Agamben, “but that of bare life/political existence, *zoê/bios*, exclusion/inclusion” (1998: 12). Agamben argues that the *homo*

sacer, “[a]n obscure figure of archaic Roman law,” is in fact central to Western politics (1998: 12). Included solely by way of exclusion from legal protections and civic belonging, indicating the capacity to be killed, the *homo sacer*—the sacred and accursed man—is reduced to bare life (Agamben 1998: 12). Agamben uses the term “*homo sacer*” to refer both to individuals consigned to bare life, and to an aspect of each individual insofar as “man” is a “living being.” The exclusion of the *homo sacer*, both literally and subjectively, supports the politically qualified life of the citizen:

There is politics because man is the living being who, in language, separates and opposes himself to his own bare life and, at the same time, maintains himself in relation to that bare life in an inclusive exclusion (Agamben 1998: 12).

The politically qualified life of the citizen within the walls of the city, the citizen’s pursuit of the *telos* of ‘the good,’ requires the inclusive exclusion of the bare life of the living being, the wolf, the forest. Agamben argues that this exclusion is exclusively biopolitical, as distinct from religious or legal (Agamben 1998: 68). He suggests that “the figure proposed by our age is that of an unsacrificeable life that has nevertheless become capable of being killed:” unsacrificeable, because so devalued as to be excluded from sacred or juridical dimensions; killed, as mere lice are disposed of (Agamben 1998: 68). “What confronts us today,” he writes, “is a life that as such is exposed to a violence without precedent precisely in the most profane and banal ways” (Agamben 1989: 68).

Though its heroine lends herself to comparisons with Agamben’s *homo sacer* figure, *Sacred Blood*’s critique of the exclusionary logic that underwrites Christianity’s ascetic strand runs counter to Agamben’s specific claim that excluding and killing bare life is biopolitical as opposed to religious. The dialogue and plot of *Sacred Blood* would indicate that the economy of sacrifice belonging to Christian ascetic practices which hierarchically separate body from spirit and exclude nature from spirituality frame an inclusive exclusion of biological life, a reduction to bare life of some to support the elevated life of others. In Gippius’s play, Christ’s sacrifice on behalf of humans is presented as contingent on rendering the *rusalki* disposable. The unclean, unsacrificeable *rusalki* are left to die, not as sacrifices but as collateral damage from Christianity’s founding sacrifice. Returning to Mbembe, for the native caught in the zone of necropolitics “sovereignty means the capacity to define who matters and who does not, who is disposable and who is not” (Mbembe 2003: 27). In *Sacred Blood*, what might be termed a ‘necrotheology’ emerges that defines who is sacred and who is profane, who is human and who is “subhuman” (Osipovich 2014: 2), who is disposable and who is not.

While Gippius's play presents the *rusalka* as a *homo sacer* figure and locates an exclusionary logic within Christianity, she also presents a competing and salvific voice within Christianity. In loose Nietzschean terms, Gippius's play places the life-denying impulse of Christianity in conversation with its more life-affirming drives. Necrotheology is countered with a kind of biotheology, a theology which affirms natural, biological life rather than excludes and negates it. In *Sacred Blood*, the rationalist and legalistic discourse that negates, excludes and fragments is also contrasted with a mystical, ecumenical, almost pantheistic, love-based theology with roots in Soloviov and affinities with mystical anarchism.

Throughout *Sacred Blood*, Pafnuty's simplicity and love is pitted against Nikodim's invocation of textual and legal authority, as the play explores the *rusalochka's* plaintive opening question. Why does the Other need to die? The answer is a chorus and counter-chorus: Pafnuty calls for love, mercy and salvation whereas Nikodim relies on Christ's punishing "sword." Nikodim demands strict and unforgiving obedience to God's laws, deploying a discourse of domination and death:

In the books it is said of God's reason that he who has transgressed the law will die. And if you blaspheme the mystery of baptism your soul will perish. There is no forgiveness for one who has transgressed the law (Gippius 2000: 28).

Pafnuty counters Nikodim's invocation of an unforgiving power, with freedom and a concern for justice: "But why do you fret about my soul?," Pafnuty asks Nikodim. "Am I myself not free to think of it? Am I not free to lose it, if I consider it just?" (Gippius 2000: 29). When Nikodim dismisses the *rusalka's* songs as "festival tunes," Pafnuty counters: "So what? Song is also prayer. To each his own" (Gippius 2000: 18).

Abjuring blind obedience to the contents of books, even holy books, Pafnuty privileges independent thought, alternative ways of relating to the Creator, and responsiveness to others who are in turn responsive to the call of God. Pafnuty's conception of justice and an appropriate relation to God is based on what Emmanuel Lévinas would later describe as the call of "the Other," the "anarchic" call to ethical responsibility by another particular human being in a face to face encounter (Lévinas 1989: 92). "[T]he idea of the Infinite," writes Lévinas, "is to be found in my responsibility for the Other" (1989: 5). Pafnuty calls Nikodim's attention away from theoretical knowledge, to the soul that asks to be saved:

I don't know, Nikodim. I don't know the books. I don't have the mind for the sacred books. But it just seems to me one must not condemn a soul that asks to be born to God. It must be saved (Gippius 2000: 28).

For Pafnuty, the face of the Other who “asks” to be born to God is a sacred call. While Nikodim dismisses the *rusalka* as a “phantasm,” Pafnuty regards Nikodim's books as themselves abstractions that pale in comparison with the face of the Other who asks to be saved. Nikodim's refusal to heed the Other's call therefore jeopardizes his own soul and relationship to God. When Nikodim threatens Pafnuty with the loss of his soul if he baptizes the *rusalka*, Pafnuty responds passionately: “I do not recall all of God's words, but these I recall: Those who seek to save their own soul will lose it” (Gippius 2000: 29). Pafnuty's privileging of concern for the Other over the abstraction of laws is echoed in Lévinas's “Ethics as First Philosophy”:

One has to respond to one's right to be, not by referring to some abstract and anonymous law, or judicial entity, but because of one's fear for the Other. My being-in-the-world or my “place in the sun”, my being at home, have these not also been the usurpation of spaces belonging to the other man whom I have already oppressed or starved, or driven out into a third world; are they not acts of repulsing, excluding, exiling, stripping, killing? (Lévinas 1989: 82).

Through Pafnuty's passionate and loving opposition to Nikodim's violent and heartless dismissal of the *rusalochka*, *Sacred Blood* clearly embodies an acceptance of the *rusalka*—of nature, of the body, of the feminine, of Otherness, and of fear for the Other—which she symbolizes. The answer to the *rusalka*'s question emerges, not through logical debate or theoretical prose—Nikodim's tools—but viscerally, through sound. A fugue of voices and sounds sweeps up the audience; *rusalka* songs are drowned out by church bells, bits of Nikodim's prayer celebrating Christ's sword and fury answer the *rusalki*'s joyful, egalitarian songs addressed to each other as “brothers” and “sisters”, collectively forming almost a Greek chorus.

YOUNG MERMAID: Tonight we are alive and joyful,
Our joy is like the moonlight.
Let us call to one another,
We lend our voices to each other!
We of the lake, river, wood, valley, desert,
underground and aboveground, great and small, shaggy and bare,
We'll all let each other know we're here!
o-ye! o-ye! Answer, brothers! Answer, sisters! (Gippius 2000: 23)

(At the end of the song NIKODIM 's singing is heard; he is returning with the pails of water. At first PR. PAFNUTY and the YOUNG MERMAID do

not hear him) NIKODIM (offstage).
 Eternal praise and glory,
 To our One Lord,
 Just and Fearsome!
 Eternal praise and glory!
 Blessed is His searching mercy,
 Blessed is His punishing right hand,
 Thy slaves serve Thee, Heavenly King,
 Singing to Thee praise and glory.
 To the Father-who sent His Son to death,
 To the Son-who brought battle and division,
 To the Spirit-that descended on the foolish-
 Glory for all eternity! (Gippius 2000: 24)

[N]IKODIM (closer).
 To Thee, Who brought not peace, but a sword,
 To Thee, Who defeated death with Thy blood,
 To Thy coming in power and glory (Gippius 2000: 24).

The *rusalki's* celebration of unity among nature's denizens runs counter to Nikodim's rhetoric of war. The tension between the two sides intensifies at the end, as Nikodim's song of wrath and fury against transgression of God's boundaries is countered by the *rusalki's* question: "Where's the end to the sky above?/ Where's the end to the sky below?":

(NIKODIM is almost not singing, but speaking.)
 [T]hou art merciful, Lord, long-patient and ever-merciful,
 but the hour of Thy wrath shall come,
 those not knowing Thee shall fall before Thee,
 and Thy fury shall rain upon them.
 Thou shalt reach out Thy right hand and destroy earth and heaven [...].

(Stops. Immediately the song from the lake, like the rustling of leaves, is heard.)
 Where's the end to the sky above?
 Where's the end to the sky below? (Gippius 2000: 36).

6. CONCLUSION

"If that Idol means the whole of love, then love always amounts to a murder—to a murder of the other" (Irigaray 1991: 188).

When the *rusalochka* finds out that her beloved Pafnuty might lose his soul if he baptises her, she chooses instead to gamble with her own soul. She

stabs him to death, knowing that he will live eternally in heaven and that she will live eternally, but possibly in Hell. She “doesn’t care,” however. She has, in her view, performed Pafnuty’s will by doing Christ’s holy will. Trapped in an economy of sacrifice that is already in play, the *rusalka* sacrifices Pafnuty’s body to fulfil Christ’s will. In so doing, she sacrifices her own body, Christ-like, to the torments that will face her at the hands of the angry villagers; and sacrifices her soul to the possible torments of Hell. Like Kierkegaard’s knight of faith, she has taken an Abrahamic leap. She asks a different question now, with just as much rhetorical power as her initial one:

Will He, whose will was done by me, give me eternal torment for my own torment? Because for His sake I spilled blood which was dearer to me than my own? (Gippius 2000: 37-38).

The *rusalochka* has left her fate in the hands of an ambivalent God, and the playwright has left us, the audience, with a challenge to our own faith, a test of our own beliefs. Do we believe in a God who would condemn the *rusalochka* to the fires of Hell? Whether this was even a tragedy, as argued by Joanna Kot in *Distance Manipulation*, or a divine comedy, is left unresolved. The loving priest is murdered, and the young *rusalka* may suffer the eternal torments of Hell. Yet at the very end, the *rusalka* has the last word, in answer to Nikodim’s threats of eternal torment: “I don’t care,” and just before this Nikodim’s vengeful speech is interrupted by a miracle:

NIKODIM (turning away and covering his face, impassively). Let my hand not touch you. But tomorrow ...

YOUNG MERMAID (joyfully). Do you hear the bell? No! But I hear it. There’s no one to ring it. He’s ringing it himself. (Very weak clangs of the bell are mingled with the distant song at the lake, so distant that the words cannot be heard) (Gippius 2000: 38).

We are not given a definitive answer, something Nikodim might cite; no distinct words that can be heard; yet we hear the service bell—Pafnuty’s ghost is ringing the bell, and the bell’s faint sound is mingling, not clashing, with the indistinct sound of the songs of the lake. A merging. A foreshadow of Pafnuty’s soul reuniting with the *rusalochka*’s, pagan and Christian worlds harmonizing? Word harmonizing with blade of grass, logos with cosmos, body mingling with soul, a eucharistic moment? Kenosis resolved?

In *The Birth of Tragedy*’s “Wisdom of Silenus” parable, Nietzsche presents the pessimistic “folk wisdom” voiced in ancient Greek texts (Barringer 2012: 3). Captured by King Midas and forced to tell him “what was the best and most desirable thing of all for mankind,” Silenus “gave a shrill laugh” (Nietzsche 2003: 22) and responded:

“Miserable, ephemeral race, children of hazard and hardship, why do you force me to say what it would be much more fruitful for you not to hear? The best of all things is something entirely outside your grasp: not to be born, not to be, to be nothing. But the second best thing for you—is to die soon” (Nietzsche 2003: 22).

Nietzsche provides this story to call attention to the pessimism that ancient Greeks overcame in developing their life-affirming civilization. Elizabeth Barringer writes, in “The Wisdom of Silenus: Friedrich Nietzsche, the Heroic, and Human Mortality”:

This passage introduces Nietzsche’s fundamental insight that the depth and beauty of “Greek” life was not a denial of the “fears and horrors of existence,” but rather a response to them (Barringer 2012: 5).

These “fears and horrors” primarily concern the ephemeral nature of human existence, and the meaninglessness introduced by mortality. Giacomo Gambino observes, in “Nietzsche and the Greeks:”

The experience of the radical temporality of existence initially struck the Greeks with horror and terror. For if all existence is self-consuming, then any individuated form of existence would appear futile. In Nietzsche’s view, the root source of suffering for the Greeks was not the fear of death but the meaninglessness of an existence in which everything falls into oblivion (Gambino 1996: 418).

Perhaps with Nietzsche’s parable in mind, *Sacred Blood* presents a ‘reversal of mortals:’ through Christ’s intervention, humans become immortal and the pagan deities become the “ephemeral race.” “People knew that we alone were immortal,” the old *rusalka* tells the *rusalochka*, “and they respected us and were humble before us” (Gippius 2000: 8). Resentment festered underground, however; the old *rusalka* continues:

[I]t was no good for them, with such short lives and death too, and they only acted as if they were humble; but secretly they grumbled and thought something else. Then a Man was born among them, whom they called God, and He spilled his own blood for them and gave them an immortal soul. [But] since then we’ve learned that we’re not immortal, and we’ve begun to die (Gippius 2000: 8).

Whereas woman *qua rusalka* “becomes the ground upon which nationalism builds its discourse” in nineteenth-century Russian opera (Naroditskaya 1998: 211), in *Sacred Blood* the *rusalka* becomes the ground on which Christianity builds its eternity.

Biblical scholar Valerie Abrahamsen observes that recent archaeological excavations have “yielded finds indicating that, unlike later societies, people [of Old Europe and the Mediterranean] revered a powerful female deity—in effect, a female manifestation of Nature or Earth and all its (her) attributes” (Abrahamsen 2002: 5). According to Abrahamsen, artifacts “in countless Neolithic sites—overwhelmingly female in form—bear symbols of a deity that link her with water, animals, plants, birth, life, death and regeneration—indeed, all of Life” (2002: 5). Abrahamsen relates this prehistoric Nature goddess figure to the depictions of “[d]ucks and hens, fish, baskets of foot, and roses” in Roman catacombs, and to the “private pagan-Christian” *Via Latina* catacomb’s homage to both Demeter and Persephone and Jesus (2002: 10). The Nature goddess and her later incarnation in the catacombs of ancient Rome arguably underwrite the images of Christ that Merezhkovsky’s young Julian encounters on the sarcophagi near Constantinople, e.g., a shepherd youth, “‘Orpheus, [J]onah and the Whale, the Dove, and the Fish’” (Gatrall 2010: 150, citing Merezhkovsky 1989: 26).

The fish symbol in particular, Abrahamsen notes, carries “several meanings for early Christians but hearkening back much earlier” (2002: 11). Citing Tertullian’s reference to “we little fishes” who like Christ (*IXΘΥΣ*) are “born in water,” Abrahamsen writes:

Even the church father Tertullian in his work *De baptismo* appears to connect early, goddess-related symbols to Christian theology. [T]ertullian and other early Christian leaders argue that the goddess, one of whose domains was water, the environment of the fish, has been replaced by Jesus the Christ; the goddess’ life-giving waters, essential to all living things, have been replaced by the more esoteric and symbolic waters of baptism, possible only through conversion to the Christian faith. Tertullian’s reference to being saved by water obviously refers to Christian baptism, yet it undoubtedly hearkens back to salvation and life as originating in the waters of the human female and, by extension, the all-powerful Nature goddess who provides the life-giving waters of streams, rivers, lakes and oceans (Abrahamsen 2002: 12).

Gippius’s *rusalka* figure might be read in light of both the Christian fish symbol and the earlier, Neolithic Nature goddess associated with this symbol. The Nature goddess’s simultaneous exclusion and inclusion from Christianity suggests a *homo sacer* figure, both sacred and accursed, who swims at the heart of Christian salvation.¹⁴ *Sacred Blood* would suggest that the goddess’s demise was not necessary for Christ to rise. The old *rusalka*’s account in

¹⁴ This is not to suggest the Neolithic goddess was not displaced until the advent of Christianity.

Sacred Blood indicates that the *rusalki*'s displacement was an act of revenge, spawned from years of feigned humility and *ressentiment*.

Sacred Blood depicts an exclusionary Christian subjectivity that is both produced by and produces social fragmentation, a subjectivity that founds murderous biopolitics towards an excluded Other. At the same time, Gippius's play models an inclusive Christian subjectivity that resists the call to let die, refuses to find an Other disposable—the subjectivity of the Good Shepherd who, instead of inciting fear in the Other, fears for the Other.

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