

Disorienting Suspense and Narrative Turns of the Screw in Mircea Eliade's *Miss Christina*

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Abstract

This interpretation of Miss Christina results from my personal text-oriented criticism in reevaluating the story as well as from my own response to contemporary cultural shifts in recontextualizing major literary works such as Henry James's The Turn of the Screw. I consider Mircea Eliade's comments about writing Miss Christina as a ghost story in which a young woman returns to the world of the living as a vampire and desires to be loved by a mortal to be a narrative challenge for the astute reader, a provocation similar in a comparative context to James's disclaimers about The Turn of the Screw as a mere ghost story. I note that the character doubling of Miss Christina with the beautiful young girl Simina and Egor's failed attempt to impose his own narrative of an unrealizable romance with the vampire and of his search for the truth about the girl Simina are behind the story's dynamic in an oscillating drama that highlights problematic hallucinations; they haunt the text and the Bărăgan plain as much as they haunt Egor's own mind. Finally, I argue that the story's doubling vision becomes a way of representing the horror of Egor's conflicted sexuality and of his search for moral certainty.

Keywords: masculinity, vampire, blood, curse, spell, perverse, Bărăgan plain

Mircea Eliade was fond of saying that the decision to settle in Chicago was linked to his fascination for Michigan Lake. According to his widow Cristinel, this landmark of the windy city reminded him of the Black Sea and echoed the alluring beguilement Eliade felt for dark and still waters like the Danube which he knew well from his early years in Cernavodă, the small town on the Danubian plain where he attended school as a first-grader before his family moved back to Bucharest.

If one is to give credence to Vasile Băncilă's view that the sensibility of great writers is a hybrid of their childhood and of their ancestors' inherited spaces (Băncilă 2000: 15), then Eliade's early life spent along the banks of the Danube played a crucial role in shaping his attraction to the Danubian plain as central setting for his celebrated story *Miss Christina*.

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Known as the Bărăgan, the Danubian plain of Europe's southeastern region is regarded as a natural belt that encroaches on the continent's primeval (his)stories and legends. Beyond Victor Crăciun's comments about the Danube in the work of Fănuș Neagu, which unfold the Bărăgan plain as a vast expanse of land, spotted with forests, vineyards, orchards, and cattle, this land serves in Eliade's *Miss Christina* as the foundation for an imagined community and ideal setting to articulate the interiority of a variety of subjects by acting out masculinity, gender identity, and communal identification with the national imaginary of trauma, violence, and vampire lore. (Crăciun 2002: 33)

In the note to *Trilogia culturii. Orizont si Stil. Spatiul Mioritic. Geneza Metaforei si Sensul Culturii* by Lucian Blaga, the Bărăgan plain appears to Vasile Băncilă as one of the two primordial nuclei of the Romanian spirit, the *mioritic* and the *bărăganic*, and holds a particular fascination for many writers who turned it into "an infinite fabric of artistic invention" (Voiculescu 1986: 8) that transports readers into bewildering spaces. Writing about the Bărăgan in his book pointedly titled *Spațiul Bărăganului*, Vintilă Horia talks about the Bărăgan plain as a place traversed by the Great River (i.e., the Danube) that fosters a climate of legends and ancient stories, a territory waiting to be further discovered by those joining in the tradition of consecrated writers from Alexandru Odobescu, through Panait Istrati to Fănuș Neagu. (qtd. in Marinescu 2018: 71-72)

With a sense of wonder, Vintilă Horia discusses the infinity of the Danubian plain shaped like "a real labyrinth" with the enclosed space of the Bărăgan that hides like a curtain the shifting perspectives of mirrors reflecting the hazy emergence and sudden disappearance of phantom-like creatures. (Ungureanu 2000: 19)

In Mircea Eliade's *Miss Christina*, the Danubian plain equates the fascinating landscapes haunted by ghosts and vampires in the vein of gothic tradition. Turned into a haunted place that provides a gloomy atmosphere and unsolved secrets in the style of the old house at Bly in Henry James's story *The Turn of the Screw*, the dilapidated country manor inhabited by Mrs. Moscu, Miss Christina's sister, and her younger daughter Simina, the adjacent stables, and the subterranean cellar, as well as the indeterminate village scattered nearby become a bewildering setting that, according to Sorin Alexandrescu, "grows directly from the Romanian folklore: a story with ghosts, in an accursed space, that a young man saves, killing a second time the vampire, with an iron staked through her heart." (Eliade 1996: vi-vii, my translation) [1]

And yet, the year after *Miss Christina* was published, in 1937, Mircea Eliade was fired from his teaching job at the Faculty of Letters, University of Bucharest. Could it be that the archaic universe of the millennial Danubian plain becomes, upon closer examination, a satanic playground that enacts the immutable essence of sexual depravity disguised as vampire lore? In this essay,

I propose to argue a complementary possibility of interpreting *Miss Christina* as a story that violates, in a manner similar to James's famous story, the certainty of respectability and morality by taking very short steps toward our understanding of a forbidden sexuality and a young protagonist's terrible self-revelations enacted far away from the mundane world of respectable courtship and marriage in the space of the beautiful but haunted Danubian plain.

The narrative centres on the painter Egor's visit to his fiancée Sanda's home, a country manor vaguely located in the Bărăgan plain, within a few hours from Giurgiu, one of the town ports along the Danube. From the moment of their arrival, Egor's incongruous curiosity focuses on Sanda's mother, Mrs. Moscu, and especially on her younger sister Simina, introduced by Sanda as "a freakish child... only nine." While dinner is served and another guest introduced as Professor Nazarie begins to talk about his archaeological digging at the neighbouring Bălănoaia, a land that once belonged to the now deceased sister of Mrs. Moscu, Miss Christina, Egor's attention is drawn uncontrollably to Simina.

He marvels at her dark curls that shine in the candlelight, at her "serene brow" and "doll-like cheeks," and admits to himself that "he couldn't take his eyes off her face." Trying with great effort to answer Sanda's questions and having to join in the table conversation, Egor continues to feel uneasy and ends up playing with a knife; it was "something he had to grasp, cold and hard, to squeeze, to relieve his nervousness" (6). [2] It seems that Egor is succumbing to a silent sort of perverse seduction, complete with the implied suggestion of the knife he is fingering and the exquisite perception of Simina's pre-sexual innocence. "He saw Simina's face turned to him. She was considering him with wonder, even with suspicion. As if she were trying to unravel a mystery. It was an absorbing, unsatisfying preoccupation, far beyond childhood" (7)

Egor's perceptions underscore the incipient impulses of a dangerous attraction that Eliade will conceal throughout the narrative underneath the apparent reality of a ghost story through a consistently disorienting turn of the screw. The result is what Shoshana Felman calls "an uncanny reading effect": "whichever way the reader turns, he can but be turned by the text." (1977: 101) Eliade talked about *Miss Christina* as an obsession he had with the death of a young woman who was murdered and returned as a vampire wanting nothing more than to love like a mortal and be loved by a mortal, and about the girl Simina as a monster-like character hiding behind the sweet appearance of a beautiful girl only because she lived in the unnatural world of the vampire (Eliade 1991: 347-349). However, the disturbing power and intensity of the scene indicate that it must have been an artistic calculation, on Eliade's part, to create uncertainty and suspense for his readers. Or, at the very least, it may be an attempt to generate a fundamental ambiguity, a persistent vibration between the stated interpretation of the story and the rather shocking, even

perverse frankness embedded in the text about sexual matters that would have been unacceptable to his contemporary readers.

Adding to the story's tense and gloomy atmosphere, the Bărăgan space depicted in the opening of *Miss Christina* becomes an elaborate and surreal stage for otherworldly occurrences that conceal devilish and ghostly apparitions and cradles tormenting, hallucinatory delusions and forbidden desires. Immediately following the dinner scene in the opening chapter when Nazarie had spoken breathlessly about the beauty of the Danubian plain, the evening drifts into the darkness of the night that infuses the creepy rooms of the manor, with its cherry wooden floors and the bedroom with the balcony overlooking the dark tree where Egor and Nazarie take an uncomfortable refuge. Their conversation focuses once again on the lower course of the Danube and the Bărăgan plain used as perfected narrative imaginary to the story. Nazarie alludes to the great river and the special smell of the Bărăgan:

"If you keep quite still for a while," Mr. Nazarie spoke, breathing in slowly, without hurry, "you can feel the Danube ... I can."

"It must be quite a distance, though," Egor said.

"Some thirty kilometres. Maybe less. But it's the same night. You can feel it immediately."

"It's the same air too," he added, slowly turning up his face and inhaling the air, open-mouthed. "You never lived near the Danube, it seems. Or else, you seldom happen to miss the scent. I can feel the Danube even in the Bărăgan plain."

Egor laughed.

"Isn't it a bit too much to say that you feel it in the Bărăgan plain?!"

"No, it isn't," Mr. Nazarie explained. "Because it isn't the smell of water, it's not a humid air. It's rather a stagnant smell, much like the smell of clay and of thistles."

"That's vague enough," Egor put in smiling.

"Yet, you're soon aware of it wherever you may be," Mr. Nazarie went on. "You sometimes feel as if whole forests waff such a scent, both complex and elementary. Formerly there were forests nearby. There was the Teleorman." (Eliade 1992: 8-9)

While providing a realistic, geographical frame to the narrative, the Danube also holds an overpowering, fantastic possession over the Bărăgan plain as an oddly dislocated site and mythical matrix with which the two guests, professor Nazarie and Egor, prepare their identification. In his announced search for the archaeological artifacts and bones of the Scythians who had inhabited this region in prehistorical times, Professor Nazarie suggests the land's archaic humanity. Implied in his name that in Romanian is a derivative of the popular name Gheorghe, son of Gaea (Gaia), the Earth goddess, Egor evokes a spiritual communion with the ageless Bărăgan plain as an eternal kernel forever

vanishing into the hazy landscape and populated by creatures crossing into the unreal.

Coupled with the tension that seemed to strike Egor with all the force of a sexual magnetism he felt for the girl Simina at the dinner table, the wondrous description of the Bărăgan acts like a fine suture in which magic and reality coincide and set the stage for the following day when Egor finds out from professor Nazarie about Miss Christina and later in the evening sees her portrait. According to the report Professor Nazarie gathers in his outings through the neighbouring village, the long-dead young woman is rumoured to have been a creature of unspeakable lust and cruelty, who had been murdered several years earlier during the peasant uprising of 1907 by the land overseer who was also her longtime lover. Based on the stories circulating in the village, Miss Christina engaged in sexual exploits with the peasants she was inviting to her bedroom to satisfy her at the time of the peasants' rebellion; as punishment, Miss Christina was shot in the back while engaged in the reprehensible lovemaking by her enraged lover. The outrageous murder underscores the difference of social class origin, making Miss Christina's depraved behaviour even more scandalous in a formula for moral and psychological vertigo that threatens to collapse the certainty of social and moral boundaries.

When Egor and Professor Nazarie are invited to see Miss Christina's portrait, her putative transgression of sexual limits and social boundaries anticipate the illustration of both horror and sin made even more insidious by the anomaly of the portrait. Having been painted several years after her death, Miss Christina's portrait projects an image of innocent girlhood and virginal beauty that can unleash in the onlooker intensely private emotions. In Professor Nazarie the portrait triggers a fear bordering on terror through the sombre background landscape unto which the professor projects his own impressions of the Bărăgan plain described earlier at the dinner table as "desperate, bare and empty, badly sun-scorched." (5) With a harrowing sense of anticipation, the portrait of Miss Christina awakens in Egor an uncontrollable desire, even if unconsciously sexual, stemming from something incomprehensible and unattainable, persisting in what he perceives to be his artistic calculations of her feelings for him:

Egor was standing away from the portrait. He was trying to realize the source of so much melancholy and weariness in his soul while facing this virgin who looked him straight in the eyes, intimately smiling as if she had chosen him out of the whole group, to confess to him alone her endless loneliness. (24)

The compensation for that loneliness due to Miss Christina's absence invites an object of affection made in Miss Christina's virginal image, which is the incarnated beautiful girl Simina as a viable substitute. In Egor's case, his

attraction to Simina is not only an amelioration of Miss Christina's absence but a representation of Miss Christina's love and yearning for him. Already manifested in the initial fascination with Simina, Egor's incipient hedonism is unleashed and enacted the very evening of the day when he sees Miss Christina's portrait. During his walk, he comes upon Simina who, according to Egor, feigns fear of the dark and jumps in Egor's arms:

...suddenly, the little girl threw herself into his arms, quite terrified, screaming. Egor was alarmed at her screams and picked her up. Simina had placed her hands on his cheeks holding his face close to her own... He was carrying her in his arms, fondling her. Strangely enough, her heart did not beat rapidly from fear. Her body, too, was quiet, warm, and cordial. Not one feverish jerk, not one drop of sweat. Her face was serene, composed. (31)

When he reproaches her for merely pretending to have been scared, the girl smiles demurely, triggering another fit of anger from Egor who "grasped her arm and gave her a jerk back to him. The girl acquiesced, putting up no resistance. 'You well know it's a different matter,' he murmured coming close and speaking the words solemnly" (32). Egor's attraction to Simina, which he tries unsuccessfully to fight back, is a violation of a taboo even more outrageous than Miss Christina's depraved behaviour, underscoring a formula for moral and psychological vertigo that collapses the socially accepted authority which Egor, like his fiancée Sanda, is desperate to establish with Simina.

Questions of authority and the girl's independence are embedded in the text contributing to the ambiguity of the story in a manner that echoes James's celebrated tale in the sense that Egor behaves much like the governess in *The Turn of the Screw* who sees herself as a vessel of moral authority, responsible not only for the two children's good breeding but also for their moral virtues in relation to the evil forces, the former governess and the sinister Quinn, who are haunting Bly and prying on Miles and Flora. In Eliade's story, Egor and Sanda discipline Simina from the very beginning when they smile apologetically over the girl's appropriation of her seat at the dinner table, in obvious collision with Professor Nazarie who had unwittingly claimed that same privileged seat, next to Mrs. Moscu. Later in the story, whenever the girl is out of sight, Sanda and Egor "give each other quick looks and blush, as if remembering an evil secret, in spite of themselves." (48) And each time Simina is not present, Egor goes to search for her and makes frantic attempts to redraw the lines of his authority when he finds her. In one instance, after catching up with the girl who had gone in the direction of the stables, Egor becomes violent when the girl asks him if he loves Sanda.

"You like Sanda, don't you? Am I right?" Simina suddenly asked.

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"I do like her and I'm going to marry her," Egor said, "and you shall come to Bucharest, as my little sister-in-law and I shall raise you myself! You'll see how all these phantoms shall vanish from your mind." (50)

Egor's reply, which hints at Simina's putative attempts to communicate with the ghost of Miss Christina, is filled with deep and inexplicable animosity further magnified by corporal aggression against the girl. In an outburst that reflects Egor's threatened masculinity or perhaps a will to masculinity for which there are no adequate terms other than anomalous desire when projected against a child, he grabs Simina, stoops over her, and whispers wickedly in her ear forcing her to fight back:

She tried to wrench her arm away. But Egor pressed deeply into her flesh. He felt real joy at thrusting his fingers into her soft, tender, devilish flesh. The girl bit her lips in pain, but no tear softened her cold, metallic eyes. This opposition drove Egor out of his mind.

"I'm going to torture you, Simina, not just kill you quickly," he whizzed between his teeth. "I'll only strangle you when I have plucked out your eyes and wrenched away your teeth, one by one. With a red hot iron shall I torture you. Go on, tell this, you know whom to tell. Let's see if ..."

That moment he felt such violent pain in his right arm, that he let the girl go free. The strength had oozed out of his body. His arms hung limp along his hips. And he didn't seem to realize where he was, what world he was in...

He saw Simina shake herself into shape, press the pleats of her frock and rub off the marks of his fingers on her arm. He also saw her smoothing her hair with her hand, set her curls in order, and fasten a hidden hoop that had come undone on the way. Simina did all this without looking at him. She didn't even hurry. As if he had ceased to exist. She made her way to the house with a lithe quick step, displaying a noble grace. Egor looked at her in amazement until her small figure was lost in the shadow of the veranda. (50-51)

Although concerned with Sanda's deteriorating health and insistent upon a rushed engagement to make public their attachment, Egor acts in strange ways each time he interacts with Simina. His increasingly altered behaviour, which has become obvious to the girl, is beginning to alarm the professor who is gradually growing aware of the callous seduction carried out by Simina. In the conversation with the doctor summoned to check on Sanda's deteriorating condition, when Simina voices her desire to join him in the hunting expedition and Egor sees the need to admonish her, the professor notices not only the girl's disdainful smile and her comprehension of Egor's unwarranted harshness in exercising his authority but also Egor's pallor in the ensuing exchanges that no one else in the room other than Simina seems to notice.

Egor looked up and slowly gazed at Mrs. Moscu and then at Simina.

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"Not at all the thing for a little girl like yourself to go shooting." he said severely. "To see innocent animals dying, to see that much blood."

In saying these last words, he looked into her eyes, but Simina didn't appear to be embarrassed at all. She lowered her eyes like any well-bred child when snubbed by her elders. Not for a second did she let Egor think that she had gathered other meanings in his speech, something the others did not understand.

.....
Simina smiled. Mr. Nazarie recognized her ever-present smile, triumphant, contemptuous, yet discreet. He was beginning to get scared of her, intimidated, sometimes paralyzed by her intensely serious crushing gaze. Owing to what unnatural perverse force did that cold irony show on the angelic oval shape of her face?

"I am glad that our young lady Sanda shall soon get well and force Egor to paint," Mr. Nazarie suddenly spoke in order to divert the discussion. Egor turned to him, his face bright. His lips however were slightly trembling. He was unusually pale, too. "I wonder why no one should notice such a change?" That same instant he spied Simina's cold, harsh eyes and he blushed; it was as if she had heard him or read his thoughts. "Simina is the only one to notice," he thought upset. (73-74)

With Sanda's inability to leave her sick bed, Egor gives himself up to the inordinate search for Simina and the magnetic attraction of new experiences that duplicate in the encounters with the girl the steamy sexuality of his hallucinatory delusions at night, when Miss Christina appears in his dreams. And each time he is in pursuit of Simina, Egor is pained to detect in her a demonic self that coexists with the girl's uncommon beauty and polite behaviour. Suspecting a trap, or a spell cast through Simina at the time of Sanda's worsening condition, he leaves his dying fiancée locked in the room with the professor and heads for the old stable where he is told that Simina has gone. Unable to find Simina's small body after a careful search "in every corner," Egor decides to return to the house but, as the sun "was sinking far away beyond the border of the fields" (79), he ends up stopping at the entrance of the old cellar. Very soon after his arrival in the dark space which Sanda had shown him on the first day of their arrival, he sees Simina who had been sent to the cellar to bring mineral water bottles for the dinner table.

The ensuing scene catches all the escalating nuances of their increasingly frequent encounters:

Egor approached and stroked her hair. She had soft, nice smelling, warm hair. Simina welcomed the fondling, lowering her lashes.

"I shall be sorry for you, Simina, leaving you here to work without help," Egor said "we're leaving tomorrow morning, Sanda and I."

The little girl slowly drew away from Egor's caress, controlling herself. She looked up at him, surprised.

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"Sanda is ill," she said, "and the doctor won't let her."

"She hasn't been ill exactly," Egor interrupted, "she was actually frightened. She thought she saw her dead aunt."

"That's not true," Simina said quickly.

Egor laughed. ... "After all, that's neither here nor there," Egor added, "tomorrow we're leaving."

Simina put up a smile.

"Mother is certainly waiting for me to bring the bottle of mineral water," she said thoughtfully. "Would you kindly help me?"

"She's laying a trap," Egor thought. A shudder passed through him as he pointed to the entrance of the cellar. But the girl considered him with such contempt that he was ashamed of his fear.

"I shall be glad to," Egor said making his way to the cellar. ... [He] could hear Simina's excited breathing as she followed him. "If she's so excited, that means I've fallen into the trap, Egor thought". (80-81)

As Egor is trying to light a match, Simina grasps his arm and accuses him laughingly of being afraid. To Egor, her voice sounds "commanding, sensual, feminine." After blowing out his match and leading the way, Simina scorns both Egor's fear with the sarcastic "our brave Egor" and his threat of "boxing her ears". She challenges him with "Why not now?" and "Just you dare" as Egor starts trembling and feels a strange fever getting hold of him. The girl's laughter on "her small red lips" sounds strange and leads to nightmarish sensations: "Egor felt the poison in his blood: an insane beastly appetite coursing through his body. He closed his eyes trying to remember Sanda's face. He only saw a wave of crimson steam. He only heard the little girl's bewitched voice." (82)

As they advance into the dark, the girl approaches Egor and takes his hand, triggering powerful emotions: "Egor acquiesced, breathing heavily. His eyes grew dim. He was suddenly in a dream, dreamt long ago, vainly trying to remember when he had come out of it, when he had started a new life. 'How snug this is, how snug by Simina's side!'" As he sits on the cellar floor among the bags at the girl's command, "his limbs are burning, his hands shaking" as he feels Simina's body close to him. Frantic about the tight dark space, he asks the girl about the ghost of Miss Christina but the girl laughs and strokes his hair, urging him to calm down while he hugs her. With her lips close to his ears, Simina urges Egor not to lock his door at night, and she laughs and dances, prompting Egor to kiss her hand and to implore her not to leave him. Finally, after declaring that he must not kiss her hand but rather kiss her the way she wants to be kissed, "she pressed her mouth on his, biting into his lips." At that point, we read that "Egor felt unspeakable happiness, heavenly and holy, in his flesh. His forehead backwards, he abandoned himself to that kiss of blood and honey. The little girl had crushed his lips, wounding them. Her

unripe body remained cold, slim, fresh. Feeling the blood, Simina lapped it thirstily." (83)

The scene ends with the girl's utter dissatisfaction with the way Egor kisses her and her demand that he kisses her shoe, not her feet as he had been feebly trying to do. When Egor weakens and falls limp on the sacks, she calls him a bore, asks that he takes off his coat, and starts scratching him:

Egor undressed slowly, without a thought, his face smeared with dust and tears, a few marks of blood, round his mouth. The smell of blood had maddened Simina. She approached the man's bare chest and began scratching, biting. The deeper the pain in the flesh the sweeter Simina's nail or mouth felt. "And yes, I ought to wake from this dream." Egor thought once more. "It's for me to wake up or I shall go mad. I cannot bear it any longer." (83-84).

But Egor's feeble attempts to run do not materialize. As Simina's scratching continues, "his humiliation dripped in delights he had never thought possible for a human being to taste". With a sense of self-loathing, he finally follows Simina's cold summons to return to the house while she looks on "distant, contemptuous, smiling a wan and bitter smile".

Tragically trapped in the girl's seductive game, Egor can no longer justify his absence from Sanda's room throughout the evening, his dirty clothes or the bloodied lips that the professor notices in horror after the return from the cellar. Under the professor's scrutinizing gaze, Egor "was looking into the void, upon the ground. He dared not raise his eyes too high up." (87) And later, at the dinner table, Egor is terrified by the doctor's accusations that he had been seen walking in the park with an elegant lady. Is the doctor's inquisitiveness, his questions about the hallucinatory scene and seeing ghosts, something that Egor fabricates in his own mind to pacify his tormented thoughts about the cellar encounter with Simina? Is he further deluding himself in the prerogatives of his male condition (a respected painter, a devoted fiancé) by accusing a mortal's inability to save himself from Miss Christina's demonic influence? Is the doubling of Simina with Miss Christina a turn of the screw effected not only by the putative appearance of ghosts but by a duplication which produces refractions of the women in the story (the aloof Mrs. Moscu and the eerie nanny) to account for Egor's depravity?

The ending of the story returns to the gothic mode that has all along been part of Eliade's design. But it does not reduce the story to a tale of demonic possession. My argument that Mrs. Moscu, the nanny, Simina, and Miss Christina are one and that Egor, the professor, and the doctor are also one is based on the view that Eliade saw the ambiguity in masculine hegemony, and focused on Egor as a dangerous person to society due to the incongruity of his maleness and sexuality that put him in peril of displacement, debasement, and destruction.

Eliade's doubling imagination that has combined the girl Simina and Miss Christina into one character and Egor and the professor into another one is rooted in society's splintered vision of maleness and sexuality. On the one hand, Egor and the professor are guardians of morality whom society celebrates. In the haunted Bărăgan plain, they encounter agents of Satan, vampires and ghosts, who threaten innocent souls like the girl Simina, who need their protection and whom they are meant to guard. So Egor supervises Simina and tries to discipline her, but he sustains the vision of the guardian with difficulty. As the evil forces approach him with impunity in the disguise of the girl's putative advances, Egor imagines that he is seduced like a helpless creature by a ghost who places upon him her infernal power through the beautiful little girl.

But his doubt of himself and his voluptuous moves toward the girl waver in his convictions of Simina's secret wickedness which can only be prompted by Miss Christina. Each time Egor encounters the girl he is desperate for justification and even invokes Miss Christina although, in anticipation of their final encounter, he leaves the door to his room unlocked at night, as Simina demands before walking away from him in the cellar. Nevertheless, after prayers with the professor, and before entering the room, Egor is

calm, clear-headed. He felt strong and fearless. He put his hands in his pockets and began thoughtfully pacing the room. Nearly twelve o'clock, he remembered. ... But these ancient superstitions were of no importance. It was his strong faith and hope, his great love for Sanda that kept him lucid and strong. ... He passed the door several times but could not decide to lock it. Better like this, unlocked. ... He wanted to continue his thought: "should the Lord God and Holy Mother of God help me." But he was unable to finish his hopeful, firm thought. His mind went dark. He seemed to be struggling as if to wake from a dream. He stretched his arms, felling them curved, slightly shivering. He was not dreaming. ... He made up his mind: he would not lock the door. He would only close the window. ... "Don't lock the door tonight," he accurately remembered Simina's words. (99-100)

After the tapping on the door and Egor's hoarse voice inviting in the guest, Egor drifts into hallucinations and mad lovemaking with what he identifies as the ghost of Miss Christina. As her voice speaks only in his thoughts and his gaze is riveted on what he talks himself into believing to be Miss Christina, Egor sees that "the girl had begun to undress... virgin breasts, they were firm, round, grown freshly, and held very high by the knitted work of her stays." Egor draws "sweet passion" and delights in "love-making as never dreamt of." (105) The confusion between dream and reality or the doubling vision of ghost and girl is magnified as the night draws to its end and the professor and the doctor, who are wandering outside seized with terror, detect Simina outside Egor's room, in the middle of the broad walk. Seemingly unnerved by the

professor who utters in wonder “How on earth could she be here?”, the girl starts walking toward the nearby trees, “stubbornly peering into the darkness in front of her, never turning, never hearing anything” (107), while her small body disappears and reappears in a game of hide-and-seek that sets the two men in hot pursuit.

Finally, with the flames consuming Mrs. Moscu’s house from the gas lamp he had accidentally overturned, Egor is ready to kill the ghost of Miss Christina. Together with the professor, and with the village peasants following them, Egor proceeds toward the cellar where on the wet ground they find “Simina lying on the soft, scratched earth. She didn’t even hear the steps of the two men, and the light of the oil lamp did not seem to wake her out of her trance. Egor began to shake, approaching Simina’s small tattered body.” With a total lack of concern for the girl or the reasons for her frightening condition, Egor begins to shake her asking frantically about Miss Christina:

“She is here, isn’t she?” he whispered shaking her by the shoulder.

The little girl turned her head and regarded him without surprise. She did not answer. She clung close to the earth and vainly raked it with her nails, obstinately keeping her ear to the ground, tensely waiting. Her hands were blood-stained, her calves muddy, her dress dirty from leaves that she had crushed, running and frequently slipping in the dark.

“No use waiting for her, Simina,” Egor said harshly. “Christina died once, long ago, and now she’s going to die once and for all.”

He rushed at the little girl furiously, brutally lifted her from the ground, and shook her in his arms.

“Wake up! Christina is now going to hell, and the fires of hell will burn her corpse!”

A strange turbid feeling came over him as he was saying these words. The little girl was limp in his arms. Her eyes seemed glassy, and she looked at him with a haggard stare. She had bitten her lips and the blood showed. Egor began fretting.

“I must make up my mind quickly,” he thought shuddering, “to save them all I must decide.”

“Hold her in your arms and cross yourself!” he said to Mr. Nazarie, handing him Simina’s body, drained of all strength. (131-132)

Trying to extract a confession about Miss Christina’s whereabouts from Simina, in a manner eerily similar to that of the Governess demanding to find out from the boy Miles about the nightmarish Quinn in Henry James’s *Turn of the Screw*, Egor is assailed by the perverse horror of his own guilt by diffusing the grossness of his conduct on a small helpless creature like Simina, who may have been for Egor a revelation and fulfilment of his own sexual depravity.

Cruel and mad, or maybe pitiable like James’s Governess, Egor has discovered not the ghost of Miss Christina, but a projection of his own secret self, a naked representation of his condemnable desires at odds with the social

view of his person as a conserver of morality and defender of faith. In Simina, whom he perceives as a miniature replica of a vampire, Egor sees a menace to the socially accepted definition of class and gender and a testimony to his degradation. In this context, by doubling the presentation of Miss Christina and Simina, Eliade makes the story more daringly subversive of the claims to the admiration of masculine figures praised in the patriarchal social figuration as necessarily commanding authority and respect; rather to the contrary, such honourable males may, in fact, be just as tyrannical wielders of power and insidious destroyers of female selfhood in its innocent stages.

Armed with a sharp iron bar and ready to defend the strong will to his ravished masculinity, Egor

went up to the spot where Simina had lain, scrutinized it piercingly, as if trying to penetrate into it, to guess the dark treasure that it was guarding against nature. He then grabbed the iron bar and pressed down against it with the weight of his body.

“Is her heart here, Simina?” he asked, never turning his head.

The little girl gave him a perplexed look. She began to struggle in the professor’s arms. Egor pulled out the iron bar that had only half sunk and planted it near, with growing obstinate fury.

“Is it here?” he asked again as if strangled.

A thrill ran through Simina’s body. Her body suddenly stiffened in Mr. Nazarie’s arms, and her eyes rolled back in her head. Egor felt his arm trembling as he was driving the bar in. “It’s in now,” he thought savagely. He leaned upon the bar with his full weight, howling. He felt it piercing into the flesh. He was shaking, for this slow transfixing was making him sink leisurely into ecstasy, into fearful frenzy. As in a dream, he heard Simina yelling. He fancied that Mr. Nazarie was coming up to stop him, and so he grew more stubborn, fell on his knees, screwed in with his utmost strength, though the iron was wounding his hands, striking the bones of his fists. Ever deeper, further on, into the heart, into the core of her bewitched life! (132-133)

In a final turning of the narrative screw, the sadomasochistic dynamic of Egor’s threatened masculinity is shrewdly underlined in his name that suggests a dark side of his patron saint, George the piercer and slayer of the dragon who threatened Christian values. The violence Egor perpetrates on the putative vampire and on her surrogate Simina is justified as an act of righteous annihilation of the unnatural, what Michel Foucault calls the “counter-nature” bearing death to any avatar of difference (2008: 39). The act of piercing exists to make up for the antecedent of violation in the story’s imaginary construct that joins sexuality and violence through the use of phallic substitutes, such as the iron bar and the knife. One reaches for the phallic substitute when the other’s evil perpetrated against the land and its people attains proportions comparable

to that of the vampire or its surrogate, who require pre-emptive annihilation in acts of righteous vengeance.

The origin of the land, the Bărăgan plain also present in Egor's name, is tied to the narrative of blood and soil, elements that figure prominently in the text, and becomes visible as the shimmer on the very tip of the protruding stake of the righteous bearer of phallic power (Egor) that pierces the heart of the threatening other, the duality of Miss Christina and Simina as the evil who resides on the other, dark side of the community represented by the villagers. The radical zeal of submitting to a higher aim to defend the morality of good and evil against the darker forces underlies Egor's pathetic bravery in pushing against the heavy metal in the wet soil, only to obscure his own corporeal limitations and the punishment for his treacherous interpellations of social morality and faith communities of the land.

Eliade's story ends with a *frisson* of suspended horror, a horrifying vision of Egor tragically trapped in the prerogatives of his maleness condition.

Notes

[1] All quotations from Eliade's story are extracted from the edition listed in the References.

[2] All translations from *Miss Christina* are extracted from *Mystic stories: The Sacred and the Profane* (translator: Ana Cartianu).

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