Sacrificial Edifice

A Girardian Analysis of Immurement in Balkan Folklore

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The numerous immurement ballads from the Balkan region typically feature a construction project impeded by repeated failure and completed only once a human being is buried alive in the foundations. This narrative conforms closely to the model of surrogate victimhood developed by René Girard in *Violence and the Sacred* (1972), particularly in the treatment of physical space, the communal nature of the violence and the sanctification of the victim—the literal 'making sacred' (*sacer* + *facere*) of sacrifice. However, in certain respects, particularly the characterization of the "walled-up wife" herself, the narrative deviates from Girard's model, and the extent to which the story may be seen as a successful sacrifice or an act of uncontrolled and catastrophic violence varies from telling to telling.

Paul G. Brewster describes these immurement narratives as tales of 'foundation sacrifice' based on the 'fundamental conception that it was necessary to make a human sacrifice in order that a structure might be saved from repeated destruction' (Brewster 35, 40, 46). Milne Holton and Vasa D. Mihailovich similarly describe the 'pagan Slav belief that the gods will not allow the raising of a fortification, or of any building, unless they are appeased by human sacrifice' (Karadžić 78). These interpretations emphasize what Girard calls the 'theological basis of the sacrifice' in which it 'is the god who supposedly demands the victims' (Girard 7). Thomas Butler refers to a 'primitive intuition that man-made structures, such as castles and bridges, eventually take on a living quality of their own, and that one way to hasten the assumption of such a quality is to immure a living person within the foundation of the structure' (Butler 429). Mircea Eliade describes 'a common ideology' that 'a construction [...] must be animated, that is, must receive both life and a soul. The "transference" of the soul is possible only by means of a sacrifice [...] a violent death' (Eliade 83). These interpretations appeal to the concept of sympathetic magic, whereby the quality of an object or creature may be transferred into another. Such readings to some extent move away from the purely theological idea of appeasing a deity, while remaining within the mythic framework of supernatural explanations of sacrificial violence.

However, an analysis of the tales through Girard's lens not only offers an explanation of the foundation sacrifice independent of theology, but casts doubt on whether these ballads concern sacrifice in a ritual sense at all. Girard dissects sacrifice thus:

> All sacrificial rites are based on two substitutions. The first is provided by generative violence, which substitutes a single victim for all the members of the community. The second, the only strictly ritualistic substitution, is that of a victim for the surrogate victim. (Girard 284)

In Girard's model, the surrogate victim is a member of the community whose selection as surrogate alienates them from their fellows, an insider made foreign; the ritual victim is an outsider imported into the community to take the surrogate victim's place, a foreigner brought inside. In some immurement stories, these two victims seem to appear in reverse order. In 'The Building of Skadar,' for instance, King Vukašin is initially told that he cannot build his fortifications until he 'find[s] a Stojan and a Stoja [...] and bur[ies] them within the tower wall. | Then the groundwork will retain all its strength' (Karadžić 80). As Holton and Mihailovich explain in their gloss, these names derive from *stojati* (to stand, be erect, be immovable): via sympathetic magic, the walls and foundations would be imbued with the strength of the twins' names, thereby enabling the construction to go ahead. This is in accordance with Butler and Eliade's interpretations.

In Girard's understanding, this supernatural process of transferring qualities from victim to structure is a mythic elaboration on the true purpose of sacrifice: to prevent a cycle of reciprocal violence through the controlled violence of sacrificial killing. The community for which the fortifications stand cannot survive without this means of preventing such a cycle. Thus, on the symbolic level, the fortifications cannot be built until the sacrifice has taken place. The strength that it will provide is the unanimity created by collective participation in the killing. The ballad lends itself to the Girardian interpretation because the twins are not found, necessitating the sacrifice of a member of the community. On the narrative level, the search for the twins is tangential. The ballad would effectively emphasize the importance of sympathetic magic only if they were found and the fortifications successfully constructed on top of them. This is precisely what happens in 'The Bridge at Višegrad': Mitar 'seized Stoja and Ostoja, | And he walled them up in a pillar of the bridge; | The bridge over the Drina stood up for him' (Butler 447). This appears to be an instance of successful ritual sacrifice: further complications in the story are due to later negligence and error on Mitar's part, independent of this episode. Mitar is building a bridge at a pre-established town, and thus does not need to build a new community based on an entirely new set of sacrificial rites.

The successful sacrifice of the twins is a departure from the norm, however. In 'The Building of Skadar'—more typically—the twins are elusive, and a victim is instead chosen from within the community, a surrogate victim in Girard's terms, Gojko's wife. Her sacrifice is effective: 'The work is done; they've closed her in the tower' (Karadžić 86). Rather than substituting a surrogate victim for the community, then a ritual victim for the surrogate victim, Vukašin attempts a ritual sacrifice (the twins) first, unsuccessfully, then turns to a surrogate victim from inside his community. The ritual sacrifice is unsuccessful because, unlike Mitar in 'The Bridge at Višegrad,' the three brothers are building an entirely new town, symbolic of an entirely new society, and so must form their community through a new ritual framework, built on a new initial surrogate victim. This is not a story of ritual sacrifice, as 'The Bridge at Višegrad' is, but of a foundational act of violence upon which a civilization is created. Gojko's wife fills this need as the twins, being outsiders, were unable to. Girard argues:

> The role of the surrogate victim can be ascertained, I believe, even on a spatial plane [...] it has imposed its image on *the very structures* of some communities, at those special locations forming the center of the community, sites generally dedicated to the spirit of collective unity [...] these are *places where the surrogate victim met his death* or where he was believed to have died.
>
> The *traditions attached to these localities* and the ritualistic functions associated with them lend credence to the theory that sacred mob violence formed the origin of the polis. [My emphasis] (Girard 322)

Immurement narratives by definition concern the founding of structures on sites of violent death. Typically, a single victim is buried alive by a multitude of masons, a horrifying death by collective violence reminiscent of the *sparagmos* (dismemberment), one of the forms of 'sacred mob violence' that Girard discusses. Immurement stories constitute just such 'traditions attached to [...] localities' as he cites: indeed, many of the ballads we are discussing include the names of those localities in their titles. Equally, the fact that the victim is buried in walls or beneath bridges tallies with Girard's conception of the surrogate victim's liminality, in which they 'constitut[e] both a link and a barrier between the community and the sacred' (Girard 287). The "walled-up wife" remains permanently on the threshold between the polis and the outer 'sacred realm' (Girard 297).

Brewster notes the prevalent conception 'that the spirit of the victim would be a ghostly guardian of the building being erected' and the 'related [...] idea' that 'a hero buried at the gate of a city or on the frontier of a country would protect the city from capture and the country from invasion' (Brewster 39). Eliade similarly describes the idea that the victim 'continues its existence after death, no longer in its physical body but in a new body—the construction—which it has "animated" by its immolation' (Eliade 83). These notions are mythic understandings of the link and barrier that Girard describes. The victim becomes a sentinel, standing between the community they defend and the exterior 'sacred realm' of violence:

> Once the outer limits of the community have been crossed we enter the domain of savage sacredness, which recognizes neither boundaries nor limits. This is the realm not only of gods and supernatural creatures [...] but also [...] of all the rest of humanity.
>
> (Girard 281)

The surrogate victim, having been savagely killed, becomes a source of protection for the community. Buried at the boundary between inside and outside, they symbolize the unification of the community within, the true source of its protection from foreign threats and the violence that has been expelled to the sacred realm. This role of the victim is mythically understood as that of a guardian spirit, which manifests in some immurement ballads when the victim's voice is heard postmortem from the structure itself, for example in 'The Ballad of Master Manole,' where 'a voice came low | From the wall below' ("The Ballad of Master Manole").

In some versions of the story, the victim becomes a symbol not only of protection, but of prosperity. Walled up with an opening left for her breast, she continues to provide milk. In 'The Building of Skadar,' for example, the 'milk still flows today as it did then' and 'works miraculous cures | for all women who have no milk to nurse' (Karadžić 86). She has been sanctified, sacrificed in the etymological sense of 'make sacred,' and thus transforms from victim to local spirit, blessing the site of her death. Girard observes a similar change in Oedipus between Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannos* and *Oedipus at Colonus*, reviled at the end of the former and revered by the end of the latter. From this Girard concludes:

> A source of violence and disorder during his sojourn among men, the hero appears as a redeemer as soon as he has been eliminated, invariably by violent means.
>
> (Girard 91)

Here Girard's model begins to fracture, however. The "walled-up wife" is not a source of violence and disorder. She is not selected as victim even on the pretext of guilt. She is to be the wife of one of the three brother founders, 'no matter which wife comes | to bring the men food for their midday meal' (Karadžić 81). Given the apparent randomness of this selection criterion, it would appear that, in true Girardian form, '[i]t is futile to look for the secret of the redemptive process in

distinctions between the surrogate victim and the other members of the community. The crucial fact is that the choice of the victim is arbitrary' (Girard 271). In truth, the terms necessitate that the most dutiful wife, who brings her husband food most promptly—in other words, the wife who plays her part in the community most dutifully and effectively—will be the one to die. In versions that feature the three brothers making an oath not to tell their wives, the victim is also determined by the virtuousness of the youngest brother, who 'would never break his oath,' and suffers for his honesty (Karadžić 82).

The wife's superlative virtue is further emphasized in her uniquely selfless reasons for delaying in bringing the men their midday meal: unlike her sisters, who avoid the duty by feigning physical ailments, Gojko's wife will 'take the meal; with pleasure I will go. Before I go, I must bathe my baby | and I must wash his clothes so fine and white' (Karadžić 83). Through her sisters machinations, she nevertheless is first on the scene, innocently unaware of their deception. According to Brewster, in a Bulgarian version of the story, 'In an effort to save his wife [Marika], Manoil instructs her to do many extra chores before bringing his lunch,' and the 'elements themselves' try to stop her, 'a dust storm [...] filling her husband's lunch with dust and sand' but she 'returns home, prepares another lunch, and sets forth again' (Brewster 45). It is her ceaseless dedication to her wifely duties that dooms the wife to being walled up, which tallies more with Joseph de Maistre's 'view that the ritual victim is an "innocent" creature who pays a debt for the "guilty" party,' which Girard rejects in favor of 'a relatively indifferent victim, a "sacrificeable" victim' (Girard 4). As we have discussed, the "walled-up wife" resembles the surrogate victim more than the ritual victim in her relation to the community, but even in the surrogate victim's case there is an 'attribution of guilt' (Girard 82). This never occurs in any of the ballads we are discussing: the "walled-up wife" is an innocent, even uncommonly virtuous, sacrificial lamb.

The question raised, therefore, is how to reconcile the aspects of Girard's model that apply so effectively to these ballads with those that do not. Given the affinity between the "walled-up wife" and the surrogate victim in terms of her place in the community, the impact of her death on the locality and her posthumous sanctification, Girard's model has clear relevance. How, then, are we to understand her deviations from his model, and how might those deviations alter our understanding of his analysis? At present, the "walled-up wife" stands somewhere between surrogate and ritual victim. She is a community insider, somewhat alienated by her selection as a victim and slaughtered in an act of gruesome collective violence, becoming a source of prosperity after the fact. She is not, however, reviled or killed with vitriol: she is not blamed, however arbitrarily, for the community's sufferings, but killed out of tragic necessity to enable the construction.

The solution, I believe, is to be found in the various endings of the ballads. Some lend themselves to Maistre's characterization of sacrifice as vicarious redemption: the Christ-like paragon of virtue is slain in order to bless the community and ensure its prosperity, as symbolized in the ongoing flow of milk from the site of her death. Other versions, which end in catastrophe, lend themselves to the interpretation that the sacrifice is a failure. The Romanian 'Ballad of Master Manole' is an excellent example of this. The mass death whose specter looms from the beginning of the ballad in Manole's threat to 'have you all | Built up in the wall,' and which the sacrifice should prevent, is in the end realized. The death of the wife in is particularly horrifying in this version of the story:

> [T]he wall did rise
> To her ankles nice,
> To her bonny thighs,
> To her shapely waist,
> To her fair, young breasts

...
Pressed her shapely waist,
Crushed her fair, young breasts,
Reached her lips no white,
Reached her eyes so bright,
Till she sank in night. ("The Ballad of Master Manole")

The gradual progression up the body, each successive line of verse referring to the next body part, mimetically reproduces the progress of the rising wall. Traces of this effect are to be found in multiple versions of the story—in 'The Building of Skadar' for example, the phrase 'reaches to her knees' gives way to 'reach up to her waist' five lines later (Karadžić 84–85)—but it is most pronounced in 'The Ballad of Master Manole.'

Şerban Anghelescu emphasizes the 'double movement' of the wall, built each day and levelled each night, 'up and down—assertion and denial, an exasperating and terrifying pulsation for the masons' and argues that 'While the wall once raised keeps collapsing implacably, Caplea [Manole's wife in this version] embodies the opposite process. Her irrepressible heading for the wall is symbolic of victory in the building process' (Anghelescu 103, 105–6). Anghelescu conceives of this opposition in terms of the 'tension between fluid and stone,' fixity and fluidity, which is only resolved once the wall is finally built. We might see the same opposition in the image of the wife (unnamed in Duțescu's translation)'s[i]nk[ing]' as the wall rises, drowning in the fluidity of the process even as the construction is finally realized: as the wall rises up, she sinks down.

Such reciprocal movement would seem to symbolize the success of the sacrifice: the victim descends, the wall ascends, and the community is successfully established. In 'The Ballad of Master Manole,' this appearance of victory is undermined by the coda to the story, in which a further descent counters the ascent of the wall. The masons stand atop the cloister:

Boasting cheerfully,
Cheering boastfully,
From the roof on high,
Up against the sky. ("The Ballad of Master Manole")

Their hubris is reflected in their spatial position, 'against the sky.' In the translation at least, the antagonistic sense of the word 'against' suggests the affront to the divine implied by their boasting, and in any case the prepositional sense implies the same: like the builders of the Tower of Babel, they imagine that their altitude puts them on a level with God. The fallacy of this belief is proved when they make artificial wings and 'dro[p] down like lead.' Like Icarus, they strive to reach the heavens, and are rewarded with a fall.

There are multiple ways to read this ending. Interpreting along the same lines as Brewster, Holton and Mihailovich, we might see the masons' crime as a failure to acknowledge the divine permit for their construction. In claiming that they 'can always build | Yet another shrine [...] Of greater delight,' the masons attribute the achievement of their goal to themselves: trusting purely in human artifice, they 'boastfully' claim that they can build as they please, not grasping that 'the gods will not allow the raising of a fortification, or of any building, unless they are appeased by human sacrifice' (Karadžić 78). The sacrifice has not impressed their own dependence on the divine upon them, and they are punished for the hubris of their presumptions. Following the line of Eliade and Butler, we could interpret the masons' error as a failure to understand sympathetic magic. Again relying entirely on their own skill, they disregard the sacrifice, not accepting that 'a construction [...] must be animated [...] [through] "transference" of the soul [...] by means of

a sacrifice [...] a violent death' (Eliade 83). The masons ignore their debt to Manole's wife, and the supernatural means by which her death enabled their enterprise: it is for this that they are punished.

A third reading is possible, however: turning once again to Girard, we can understand the masons' fate as symbolic of the failure of the sacrifice. According to Girard:

> [W]omen are never, or rarely, selected as sacrificial victims. There may be a simple explanation for this fact. The married woman retains her ties with her parents' clan even after she has become in some respects the property of her husband and his family. To kill her would be to run the risk of one of the two groups' interpreting her sacrifice as an act of murder committing it to a reciprocal act of revenge. (Girard 13)

We have discussed how the "walled-up wife',' who comes from inside the community, but to whom no ill sentiment is expressed even during her brutal killing, does not fit Girard's model for ritual or surrogate victim. The catastrophic conclusion of 'The Ballad of Master Manole' suggests that this is precisely the point. As a highly virtuous woman dedicated to her role in the community, she is an ill-chosen surrogate victim. The mass death of the masons may be interpreted as a mythic reimagining of the catastrophic cycle of reciprocal violence that might ensue from the killing of such an unsuitable victim. Manole's dream—which causes the selection of his wife as victim—and the masons' Icarus-like attempt to fly to safety—the cause of mass death—are two of the most mythic, other-worldly parts of the ballad. This is because they are the parts most difficult to explain: why was such a virtuous woman chosen for the sacrifice, and why were the results so ruinous? As the story is passed down, mythical answers to these difficult questions evolve.

Perhaps the most mythic and illuminating element of the ballad is its final moment, however: the death and metamorphosis of Manole. Where 'The Building of Skadar,' a version of the tale with a relatively hopeful ending, has an ongoing and nourishing supply of milk spring from the site of the wife's death, 'The Ballad of Master Manole' has a feeble substitute:

> And, lo, where he fell
> There sprang up a well,
> A fountain so tiny
> Of scant water, briny. ("The Ballad of Master Manole")

The contrast recalls one of the founding myths of Athens, in which Athene and Ares participate in a duel of miracles to determine who shall found the city. Athene creates an olive tree, while Ares produces a spring of salt water. The olive tree, source of food, oil and wood, triumphs over the useless spring of undrinkable water; the fertility and prosperity promised by Athene's miracle wins her the city.

In the two versions of the immurement tale, the same standard applies. 'The Building of Skadar' constitutes success of a kind, since the tragic loss of the Gojko's wife not only enables the construction of the fortress but blesses the site with milk, a source of nourishment and symbol of prosperity (as, for example, in the Biblical tradition of the Promised Land flowing with milk and honey). Manole's tears produce a 'tiny' fountain of 'scant' and 'briny' water, quite the opposite of prosperity, plenty and nourishment.

Fundamentally, the foundation sacrifice, and sacrifice more broadly in Girard's understanding, is a means of nation building. On the mythic level, a human being must be built into a fortress to make it stand or a criminal must be expelled from the community, taking their evil with them. On the societal level, a collective form of violence must unite the community against an individual, who is then cast out or killed, thereby preventing catastrophic cycles of reciprocal violence

from continuing. 'The Building of Skadar' is an account of this process functioning, creating a prosperous society through tragic but necessary means. 'The Ballad of Master Manole' depicts the process malfunctioning; the wrong victim is chosen and the violence is reinvigorated rather than contained and expelled. The former depicts a nation founded on olive trees, the latter on salt water.

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