

THE RITUAL OF SACRIFICE AND THE ECONOMY OF VIOLENCE

Member of the Macedonian Academy of Sciences and Arts, member of European Academy of Sciences and Arts (in Salzburg). PhD, Professor Emeritus of Literary Theory, Professor of Theory of Literature, Creative Writing and Literary Hermeneutics at the Faculty of Philology “Blaže Koneski” – State University of Cyril and Methodius of Skopje, RN Macedonia.

Macedonian writer, a theoretician of literature and a literary essayist.

Is founder of the International PEN Collection Diversity (www.diversity.org.mk) and is a honorary president of the Macedonian PEN.

Several books of essays and literary theory: *Figurative Speech and Macedonian Poetry*, *Pact and Impact*, *Stone of Temptation*, *Cahiers*, *Small Literary Theory*, *Theory of Literature, introduction* (2004, into English), *Hermeneutics of Identities* (2006), *The Demon of Interpretation* (2009), *The Pleasure of Interpretation* (2009), *Macedonian Temptations and other essays* (2012), *Open Poetics* (2016).



Katica KULAVKOVA

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Abstract. Mythical and historical memory are two sides of the same reality. Folk legends remind us that there are great tragedies behind great epic heroes and mythic *deeds/images*. Hidden behind the monumental cultural, literary and artistic legacy lies shocking ritual violence with its deep logos. Sacred and profane violence have many variants and should thus be interpreted with great attention (semantic, semiotic, historical, cultural). The question of the economy of violence is of prime interest because of the wide array of personifications of violence: necessary, moderate, excessive, limitless, absolute, intentional and unintentional. The figure of the scapegoat changes, but not its role in the ritual of violence. The mythical memory of the Macedonians is sensitive and has the capacity to mystify and demystify historical stories. The Macedonian oral literature has preserved numerous legends, stories and poems which evoke the motif of sacrifice, both in its archaic ritualistic form (walling up a live woman in the foundations of bridges) and in its feudal historic forms of social and cultural politics. The focus of this paper will be the legend of King Marko (1335–1395) written down by Marko Cepenkov (1829–1920), and some other literary examples. It will also make a basic classification of violence (ritualistic, necessary, unnecessary and absolute).

Keywords: scapegoat, ritual, sacred, profane and ambivalent violence, economy of violence, evilgood, King Marko, Cepenkov, Yourcenar, Girard, *Sophie's Choice*.

Ritualul sacrificiului și economia violenței

Rezumat. Memoria mitică și cea istorică sunt două laturi ale aceleiași realități. Legende populare ne amintesc că în spatele marilor eroi epici și a faptelor/imaginilor mitice se află mari tragedii. Ascunsă în spatele monumentalei moșteniri culturale, literare și artistice se află violența rituală șocantă, cu logo-urile sale profunde. Violența sacră și profană are multe variante și astfel trebuie interpretate cu mare atenție (semantică, semiotică, istorică, culturală). Problema economiei violenței este de prim interes datorită gamei largi de personificări ale violenței: necesar, moderat, excesiv, nelimitat, absolut, intenționat și neintenționat. Figura țapului ispășitor se schimbă, dar nu și rolul său în ritualul violenței. Memoria mitică a macedonenilor este sensibilă și are capacitatea de a mistifica și demistifica poveștile istorice. Literatura orală macedoneană a păstrat numeroase legende, povestiri și poezii care evocă motivul sacrificiului, atât în forma sa ritualică arhaică (zidind o femeie vie în fundațiile podurilor), cât și în formele sale istorice feudale ale politicii sociale și culturale. Accentul acestei lucrări va fi legenda regelui Marko (1335–1395) scrisă de Marko Cepenkov (1829–1920) și alte câteva exemple literare. De asemenea, va face o clasificare de bază a violenței (ritualistică, necesară, inutilă și absolută).

Cuvinte-cheie: țap ispășitor, ritual, violență sacră, profană și ambivalentă, economia violenței, rău-bine, Regele Marko, Cepenkov, Yourcenar, Girard, Alegerea lui Sophie.

1. The Scapegoat

According to the theory of René Girard [1], in the foundations of every culture there is a human sacrifice laid. It is a 'primitive' ritual that includes the figure of the *scapegoat* (in French, according to R. Girard – "le bouc émissaire", "victim émissaire" [1]). With time, the scapegoat is replaced by a symbolic material or animal sacrifice (literally, a "lamb"). There is a popular diminutive form in the Macedonian language, of a "sacrificial lamb" which evokes either an old form of child sacrifice or expresses a certain sorrow and sympathy towards the victim, or it perhaps even discreetly justifies the tradition of sacrifice. The scapegoat of pacification and regret is, in fact, an image of the ideal victim that suffers for others' sins and thus redeems them. It would appear that the sins cannot be canceled or forgiven in their own right, but can be transferred from one subject to another. There is something mystical and not just symbolic in the phenomenology of sin. The scapegoat is necessary for others' sins to be passed on to, because that very transfer of sin on to the other is needed for the purification of sin to happen, which in turn is needed to build something eternal and of a higher purpose.

Eternity is neither naive nor innocent. It can be an excuse for new sacred or 'holy violence' over human, moral, and cultural goods (life, freedom and the basic human rights). The act of sacrifice, real or symbolic, is always a little bit mysterious [2, p. 2], thus making it an inevitable precondition for a new order of society, or a new culture, to be established. The ritual of sacrifice in the name of a higher purpose or for the 'common good' includes elements of the so-called 'founding violence', i.e. 'la violence fondatrice' [1, 2]. It is one of the most enduring traditions of the human civilization and thus presents a constituting function of every (new) culture. The ritual "reproduces the exact order of the original events" [1, p. 472] and points towards the universality of the mimetic principle (mimetic rites, mimetic sacrifice, mimetic violence). The crisis of the ritual is the precondition for tragedy to be born [1, p. 86].

The new historical constellations only actualize and contemporize the act of violent sacrifice but do not terminate it. On the contrary, new epochs are familiar with brutal forms of mass sacrifice of entire populations (based on race, ethnicity or religion) in the name of vulgar pragmatic goals (from racism to imperialism). The difference is that the contemporary civilization consciously evades creating figures of victims, because the victim can easily be turned into a hero and become deified, sanctified. As a result of this, today the victim is more likely to be satanized rather than sacred and divinized. Even the most innocent victim, when satanized, is not perceived as a victim, and the violence enacted upon this victim is accepted as justified.

2. Sacred violence

Only the topic of human violence (made by humans, particularly violence inflicted intentionally) is in the focus of this classification. The realization of grand deeds labeled as being "for the greater good" requires a certain sacrifice (and self-sacrifice), and sacrifice requires a certain amount of "necessary violence" (considered as a variant of the so-called inevitable, 'founding violence') [3]. In such circumstances, violence is inevitable and constituting. Necessary violence, seen as constitutive violence, is performed under the guise of a ritual, may it be an explicit or an implicit one. If we are to accept the thesis that the foundation of new cultural and civilizational paradigms and worldviews, new confessions and ethical codices, as well as new regimes, includes a certain amount of violence, then we should accept the necessary violence as legal and with that, as predictable.

Predictable violence may be reduced to a bearable minimum or be transformed in such a way to make the victims/losses compensated for. Such an approach uses strategies of economizing violence. The idea that good does not exclude evil/violence is a universal wisdom based on universal experience. The paradox, therefore, lies in the very foundation of great wisdom. Such is the case with the mythical 'evilgood' or 'goodevil' which, as a universal

experience, is susceptible to different historical actualizations.

The universal tradition of sacrifice in the name of a common good also has different local variants of violence, most frequently aimed at the Other [4]. In order to change the system (for the better) or to build a building of general interest, different kinds of injustice are inflicted upon people. The object of sacrifice are the low social layers of people (cheap labor), slaves, foreigners. The subject who initiates the sacrifice is the Ruler (monarch, emperor, feudal ruler, president or prime minister of a country, a global factor in the field of the so-called 'discourse of power').

The method that enables sacrifice is masked in stereotypical phrases: for the good of the people, for the protection of the country, in the name of a better future, in the name of God. Hypocrisy was invented to cover up the brutality of sacrifice. There are ideals and deeds whose realization involves a risk and a victim. As a matter of fact, victim is just another name for risk. The consequences of risk are partially predictable and reversible, and partially unpredictable and irreversible. As a result, each setting of the boundaries between justified and sacred violence and excessive profane violence is a morally delicate task. The role of ritual consists of presenting violence as a necessary sacrifice, or sacrifice as a necessary violence, be it individual or mass. The distinction between sacred violence and violent sacrifice is frail because "violence is the heart and secret soul of the sacred" [2, p. 32]. Does this mean that the ritual is a pretext for repeating the violence, implying that the ritual of violence exists in order to legalize the 'state violence' and its logos [5] and take it as social and cultural legacy? [6, 7]

3. Profane violence

A simple comparison among the several different kinds of ritualized violence shows that sacred violence has its excuse (alibi) in a common good, while profane violence has none. Some kinds of violence have their own inner logos, regardless of how dark it may be, making

them susceptible to explanation and justification (spontaneous, uncontrolled, [2, p. 104-105, p. 134]). Some of them are absurd and hermetic: the more absurd, the more hermetic they are. The classification of violence becomes problematic as it includes a sort of gradation of violence, because "violence can only be countered by more violence" [2, p. 32], and all this means its latent justification.

While behind sacrificial and ritual violence there is some common good that justifies the victims (real or surrogate), the limitless violence has no visible common good as an alibi. Absolute violence is limitless, uneconomical, pure evil that has no (traditional) sacred purpose or excuse, and it is intentional, rather than not. It involves an excess of violence, and even violence-for-the-sake-of-violence, an end in itself, without any coverage, and we can therefore identify it as "pure evil", limitless and absolute (genocide, Shoah, crimes against humanity, tyranny, religious and political fanaticism, sadism).

Such is the (European) case described in the novel *Sophie's Choice* by the American author William Styron (1979) [8], that served as the basis for the movie by Alan J. Pakula (1982) [9] of the same name [10]. It is based on a true story according to which, in Auschwitz, a Nazi officer orders Sophie, a Polish Catholic and a mother of two, to choose, quickly and irreversibly, one of her children to hand over to the concentration camp. Sophie is forced to choose which child to sacrifice because if she does not, both will be taken away from her. The sacrifice of one child is a mindless irony of the freedom to choose between two evils.

Which is the lesser evil? This is a paradigmatic example of the imposed freedom of choice that creates the illusion that the misfortune might have been even greater. There is no consolation because there is no excuse for the committed evil. In a sense, even the person making the choice is forced into a situation to share the responsibility with the criminal. Such a 'choice' is manipulative and aims to transfer the responsibility from the doer of the evil to the other, the subject that suffers the evil/violence.

This example also points to the phenomenon of the 'violent nature' as a latent anthropological characteristic of humankind [11, 12].

4. Ritualistic violence

Archaic examples give witness to numerous primitive, pagan rituals of sacrificing live and innocent people for the common good. This common good (the so-called higher cause) could be seen in: - the idea of linking two worlds through connecting two banks of the river (the erection of bridges); - the need to build fortresses and towers to save the people from war and terror; - the erection of monasteries and churches to praise God.

In the course of ritualistic sacrifice, violence is given a sacred dimension and is therefore accepted as fated and part of the tradition, thus marginalizing its brutality. Both rulers and the common folk abided by the traditional ritual. Folk legends have a subtle memory and show not only clear, straightforward, but also ambiguous examples and situations of sacrifice. These ambiguous situations pose the delicate question – does the realization of some 'common good' indeed need (necessitate) victims, even brutal ones? In the Macedonian oral and folk tradition there are examples in which memory is not purified of unwanted ethical elements and these point to the problematic nature of the very act of sacrifice, be it under the pretext of a ritual, or for the common good. Both examples mystify violence with the help of the ritual, more often than not disguised as a folk custom, pagan tradition, and superstition.

Numerous examples of ritualistic and violent sacrifice have been preserved in the Macedonian folk tradition. One of them relates to the erection of a bridge. A legend that is still alive, for example, is the one about the erection of Rada's Bridge in Kratovo. This localized historical variant (the bridge was built in 1833, on Mantcheva River "Mančeva Reka") is of the archetype of walling up a live woman who is still nursing, in the foundation of the bridge, in order for it to be eternal. "What must be done is not difficult", as the saying goes. This is the

fatalistic and religious context that gives the sacred dimension to violence (higher will).

In this specific example, the context speaks of nine brothers, builders, who built the bridge and the wife of the youngest brother, Rada. The irony is in the fact that only seemingly everything is up to fate when, truth be told, all brothers warned their wives not to come the following day to bring lunch for the workers, except for the youngest brother who honored the agreement they had and did not tell his wife what would happen if she were to bring the lunch to the workers. The story is further dramatized by the young woman still nursing a newborn and thus asking the workers to not wall up one breast so she can continue nursing her baby. The mythical image of a woman 'walled up alive' evokes the irrational fear of having one's shadow walled up and this made people run away from walls. In the afore-mentioned legend, God's will is transferred in a hazardous way and thus 'the game of luck' turns into 'a game of bad luck'. The violent sacrifice is performed under the guise of a traditional mystical and pagan belief that liberates the perpetrators of their guilt. The ritual, therefore, has a cathartic and moral role – to justify violence.

This legend is found in most South Slavic and Balkan people. A popular variant is the Serbian one that refers to the erection of the fortress of Skadar, and it tells the story of three brothers while the remaining narrative elements are the same [13]. This legend, in a version referring to the bridge on the river Bojana in Skadar, has been reworked by Marguerite Yourcenar (1903-1989) in her short story 'The Milk of Death' (*Le Lait de la Mort*) [14], published in her collection *Oriental Tales* (Yourcenar, 2016 [1938]) [15], [16, 17].

There is, however, one legend written down by Marko Cepenkov, published under number 641 and entitled "The Bridge of Spiltz" [18, p. 187-188], that testifies to a new culture of substitution in the ritual of sacrifice so instead of living humans or animals ("kurban"), material goods are sacrificed, i.e. money. The Spiltz bridge, built on the river Drim, in the vicinity of

Debar (North Macedonia), endured only after one builder ordered for money to be thrown in the river under the bridge. Needless to say, even nowadays, remains of paganism are transferred to numerous religious and para-religious rituals of sacrifice.

5. Ambivalent violence or 'evilgood'

There is yet another legend that has piqued our interest in particular. This legend speaks of the legendary folk hero King Marko, the son of King Volkašin (from the Mrnjavčević family). Marko ruled in the time period between 1371 and 1395, during the occupation of the Balkans by the Ottomans, i.e. during the domination of the mediaeval Serbian state (empire) in Macedonia. The legend is "Marko's Towers and Kukul", written under number 607 [18, p. 136-138], which does not emphasize the archaic ritual but focuses on the social aspect of the sacrifice, in the process of which the victims of social violence are neither satanized nor divinized, but rather marginalized and abused in the name of the common good. This common good is the building of Marko's towers over the town of Prilep, in order to prevent the penetration of the Ottomans and save the people from a greater evil, but to also save oneself [19, 20].

According to his legend, the building of the towers over Varoš/Prilep was done with 'a great violence' by legendary mytho-historical hero King Marko (the folk discourse has kept the Turkish word "zulum" that means violence, tyranny, evil, cruelty, injustice): "For those, now ruined, towers, stories have been passed on that they were allegedly built with a great zulum by King Marko" [18, p. 136], [21, 22]. The legend of "Marko's Towers and Kukul" raises a series of questions: What is the violence perpetrated by King Marko? Directly or indirectly? Who are the victims of this injustice? Is the fanatic building of Marko's Towers (the Kale) in the name of protecting the people a valid excuse for the violence perpetrated over the children, regardless of how indirect it may be as a violence as a result of the inhumane treatment of the mothers? Was the brutal (merciless) treatment of the

workers necessary at all, and if it was, then to what extent was it?

This same motif is found in the "Legend of Prilep, Varoš and its vicinity and the Escape of King Marko from Varoš", published under number 600 in the same, 7th volume [18, p. 122-127]. In order to build the Kale, Marko is said to have "ordered man next to man from the Kale all the way to Kukul, to pass on stones from hand to hand. What with the grandmothers rocking the cradles cursing him, what with the nursing mothers – the curses caught onto him and Kale was left to ruin." [18, p. 125-127]. Among the women there were mothers still nursing and mothers with small children. Hundreds of babies and children cried hungry, thirsty, alone. Marko forbade the mothers to feed their children and only allowed a single old woman to take care of all the children. She, of course, could not manage to feed all of them, so they died. The exact number of children sacrificed as a result of building of the Towers is not known, but this sacrifice contains elements of mass and excess violence. The image of hundreds of children crying at the foothills of the mountain of Prilep is apocalyptic. It is believed, namely, that Marko's Kale was left to ruin (just as the churches he built in Prilep and Varoš) [23], as a result of the curses of the oppressed and disenfranchised people.

The greater the excess of sacrifice, the more logical is the idea that the building of the Towers could have been done with fewer victims. Thus, paradoxically, the idea of great deeds with which a person/ruler indebts history seems to imply a bearable minimum of violent sacrifice. The question is not whether there should be any sacrifices but whether the number of victims and their suffering can be reduced to a bearable minimum. This legend introduces the motif of the anathema that came as a 'higher for the tortured people and as punishment for King Marko.

King Marko is a mytho-historical figure of a hero and a man of influence at the same time, a hero who is the savior of the people but also a ruler who sacrifices hundreds of children to build grand buildings such as the Kale and the

Tower over Prilep. The price of his deeds and buildings created for the common good is not calculated only by the number of explicit victims but also by the geometrical progression of indirectly afflicted injustices: from the destruction of families, to the taking away of the freedom of people and disrespecting their basic rights.

As a result, King Marko has a dual character. He is primarily remembered in the collective consciousness and mythology as a folk legendary hero, but the margins of the collective memory also contain some traces of his anti-heroism, mainly as a consequence of the lack of economy of the victims. This lack of economy of sacrifice turns the ritual into violence or, in fact, it de-ritualizes the act of sacrifice and turns it into excessive violence. As marginal as these traces may be in the folk tradition, repressed in the collective unconscious, the injustice perpetrated by King Marko against the innocent victims are remembered. They are remembered sufficiently in order for them to become the subject of a cultural hermeneutics of violence in all its forms, ritualistic and pragmatic.

Ambivalent violence entails a certain amount of justification, as a means to an end characteristic of each founding violence (in the name of a common good or a higher purpose, and is thus defined – paradoxically – as *evilgood*). On the other hand, the intentional excessive violence is devoid of any higher purpose (common good), therefore being absurd, counter-civilizational, barbaric, doomed to condemnation (sometimes even in the form of a criminal act), thus never going out of use (this includes the so-called crimes against humanity).

7. The Economy of Violence

The afore-mentioned examples show clearly that the Macedonian historical experiences suggest that in order to achieve certain higher goals (the common good) victims are necessary and behind the victims there is always some violence, some injustice, some evil, some absence of an awareness for the greater good. When the violence/injustice is perpetrated in the form of a ritualistic sacrifice, it signifies that the act is preced-

ed by a tradition, an awareness for the meaning of violence and its justification and excuse.

This is why the ritual entails a ‘certain economy of violence’ [1, p. 469]. Namely, the category economy of sacrifice and of violence draws the distinction between the so-called small and great, justified and unjustified, or necessary and unnecessary violence. If the grand buildings are a symbol of the progress of civilization, and great deeds are a synonym of culture, they one might say that in the foundations of each (new) civilization and culture a human victim was laid. The victim is the precondition for the survival of the community and the higher interest of the community.

Macedonian folk legends, seen as a reflected (interpreted, aware) historical experience combined with narrative and mythic imagination, suggest the idea of the *economy of violence*, and of the ritual of sacrifice. They show the antinomy of certain existential situations that pose the question of the coercion and priorities: to sacrifice one person or to sacrifice an entire community (people, city, state)? They can also serve to derive a classification from of the types of violent sacrifice because in the Macedonian culture the local experience intertwines with the universal, and the historical consciousness intertwines with the mythical.

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