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Translational and narrative epistemologies

Synopsis: The translator and the scapegoat: On mimetic desire and intercultural mediation

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TEXTE

- 1 In the summer of 1993, several poets and musicians, many of Alevi descent, were staying at the Madımak hotel in Sivas (Turkey) for a conference. One of the hotel guests was Aziz Nesin, a Turkish author who had, controversially, announced a translation of Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*, a book widely condemned for its alleged blasphemy. On July 2, after Friday prayer, residents of Sivas marched on the hotel and set it on fire. Thirty-seven people were killed and many others wounded. The international media response to the event paid ample attention to the role of Nesin, who managed to escape from the attack. This narrative framing is not illogical: the Italian translator of *The Satanic Verses* had previously been assaulted, and the Japanese translator was murdered. This article draws on several accounts of the events that took place in Sivas and discusses them with reference to the scapegoat mechanism, a central construct in René Girard's (2005, 1986) work on imitation, desire, and violence.
- 2 Girard's mimetic theory postulates that in any social group, human desires are not guided by autonomous choice or predilection, but by the desires of others. People covet the objects and positions their models attach value to, and thus desire ultimately turns models into rivals. Consequently, conflicts ensue that may turn violent. In the heat of strife and argument, a fearful symmetry manifests between individuals simultaneously caught up in mutual imitation, and whole social groups may descend into chaos as a result. In order to halt the spread of violence, all members of a community convince themselves that a single individual among them is responsible for the unrest that besets them. Such an individual, a scapegoat, then comes to be perceived as the sole source of tensions that are in fact shared among all. The scapegoat may be expelled from the community or murdered. Widespread approval of this sacrifice restores order among the

participants, at least until desire runs rampant once more. Thus, in Girard's work, violence functions both as poison and as remedy. Sacrificial rituals, for instance, may be interpreted as employing cathartic violence in a regulated, controlled environment, thus preventing its unchecked proliferation.

- 3 Within this framework, the selection of a scapegoat, or surrogate victim, depends on a widespread perception of culpability that need not correspond to any concrete responsibility for the state of conflict. Rather than on the basis of guilt, victims are selected because of their ambiguous position "neither outside nor inside the community" (Girard, 2005, p. 287). Translators, who tend to occupy a liminal position at the boundaries of the communities in which they operate, have for centuries been subjected to a common allegation, namely their supposed propensity for treachery or deceit. As Apter (2007) argues, "even under peaceful conditions, translators naturally arouse suspicion" (p. 96), and wariness of translators worsens in conflict situations since their mediating role may hint at double allegiances. The conspicuous vulnerability of intercultural agents in volatile situations is well-documented, which makes it all the more remarkable that the relevance of Girard's work to the status of the translator has not been systematically addressed.
- 4 The lack of mutual engagement between translation studies and mimetic theory can partly be ascribed to scepticism: the all-encompassing nature of Girard's work has left it vulnerable to critique on various fronts. Girard has claimed to explain the origins of ritual and religion, and his work seems to suggest that, regardless of differences in social organization, there is a single explanation for phenomena as diverse as Greek tragedy, Dinka rituals and contemporary 'cancel culture' (Wrethed, 2022). The sheer scope of the theory thus renders it underdeveloped in many respects, and one of the most remarkable oversights relates to the role of translation: Girardian scholarship is keen to draw parallels between events and stories across vast expanses of time and space, but there is little reflection on how those accounts concretely travel, through various layers of cultural and linguistic mediation, from experience to interpretation. The strange absence of sustained reflection on the process of communication itself is all the more striking in relation to mimetic theory's central outline, namely that of a community at risk

of violence which must reach unanimity when selecting a sacrificial victim. Girard (2005) describes the threat in terms of a “maleficent contagion” for which the scapegoat will provide a “cure” (pp. 84, 329), and thus opts for medical metaphors rather than solid explanations of the communicative processes involved.

- 5 This article considers whether Girard’s work on scapegoating could benefit from more reflection on the undertheorized, communicative approximation of violent unanimity. Conversely, it also aims to establish whether translation studies, particularly when concerned with the cross-cultural framing of narratives of conflict, can benefit from a confrontation with insights from mimetic theory. Ultimately, the discussion of the Sivas massacre in relation to the *Satanic Verses* seeks to contribute to a better understanding of the role of agents of translation as potential catalysts as well as victims of collective violence.
- 6 The full article of this synopsis can be found [here](#).

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