Chapter 3

Rose *contra* Girard

Kenotic Comedy and Social Theory (Or, Žižek as a Reader of Rose)

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Introduction

For Gillian Rose, Hegel is the social theorist *par excellence*; Hegel also turns out to be one of the great comic thinkers: Hegel's social theory is comic. It is an insight that Rose carries through into her interest in Kierkegaard, and informs her criticism of the social anthropologist and literary theorist René Girard whom she charges with a "lack of humour and irony."[1] Ostensibly this essay revisits Rose's critique of Girard from the perspective of Hegelian comedy. However, as I argue (in the "severe style") Rose's comic outlook is compromised by her sense of the tragic. While taking stock of Rose's criticism, I propose a Žižekian reading of Girard that avoids the severity of Rose while maintaining a fidelity to Hegel's comedic appreciation of the social task. In the first part, I outline Rose's appropriation of Hegel for the critique of social theory. I consolidate her critique by applying it to Girard's own writings on comedy and social theory to highlight the neo-Kantian element in his work. In the second part, I address Rose's comic

1. Rose, The Broken Middle, 141.

reading of Hegel, and Hegel's work on comedy, with particular reference to the distinction between tragedy and comedy. I critically contrast Hegel and Girard's approaches to the forms. In the third part, I address directly Rose's criticisms of Girard from the perspective of *The Broken Middle* and the subsequent claim that Rose's ethics of the middle is tragic. I then offer an alternative reading of Girard informed by Žižek to rearticulate Rose's middle as comic.

Part I: Hegel and Social Theory

Rose understood Hegel's critique of Kant in advance of contemporary sociological method, which assumed what she called a neo-Kantian form. Kantian philosophy renders a split (diremption/divorce) between the subject and object; the transcendental deduction is an attempt to demonstrate that despite this split there are key *a priori* concepts that can be deduced as correctly applying to objects of our experience.[2] In other words, the experience of a given object must in some way conform to the categories of cognition; we can know a given object through the determinations of experience, even if we cannot know that object in-itself. As Rose points out, Hegel's concern was that philosophy was subsequently restricted to the justification of objective validity by way of the application of the *a priori* forms of knowledge and taken in this fashion any given object of experience can only be understood by subordinating it to those forms. As Rose puts it, "a transcendental account reduces knowledge to experience,' to the synthesis of appearances. It makes the conditions of the *possibility* of experience in general likewise the conditions of the possibility of the objects of experience."[3]

Natural Law

The implications of this critique of Kant for social theory are clarified by Hegel in his essay on *Natural Law* from his early Jena period. In *Natural Law*, Hegel critiques the scientific empiricism of Hobbes, amongst other natural law theorists, who promulgated an individualist doctrine of rights. Their work is scientific to the extent they subject society to the rational method/gaze, and empirical because they claim to draw their findings from the observation of the world. Hegel draws out the circularity of the arguments involved. Natural law theorists seek to show that individuals living

2. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A84–130, B116–69.
3. Rose, Hegel contra Sociology, 4.

together had certain inalienable rights that ought to be respected and, in defending the claim, appeal to a hypothetical state of nature. The problem arises because "what in the chaos of the state of nature or in abstraction of man must remain and what must be discarded . . . In this manner, the guiding determinate can only be, that as much must remain as is required for the exposition of what is found in the real world: the governing principle for this *a priori* is the *a posteriori*. If something in the idea of a state of law is to be justified, all that is required, for the purpose of demonstrating its own necessity . . . is to transfer into the chaos an appropriate quality."[4]

Natural law theorists assumed in advance the conclusion they set out to prove; they abstract from "everything capricious and accidental,"[5] by which Hegel means that contingent, historical, social relations and customs are subtracted from the social picture to leave only the chaos of individuals in nature, which in turn then becomes the basic truth of man. Little wonder Hegel considered the priority of individuals in a state of chaos a "fiction."[6]

In the same way, a given law can be shown to be grounded in the interests of the governing state, Hegel shows how the "fiction" that grounds natural law is taken from *bourgeois* property relations; that is, natural law derives from the want to establish universal private property relations and rights. It is not that Hegel wants to condemn private property, but to highlight how a climate that fosters a space of pure possession can take hold in a way that results in pure eudemonism.

Kant may not be associated with empirical natural law, yet as Hegel argues, Kant's practical reason offered a variant. When Kant tried to give content to the form of moral reasoning (the categorical imperative) by applying it in certain cases, he did so by posing whether the maxim to "increase my wealth by every safe means can hold good as universal if I have a *deposit* in my hands, the owner of which has died and left no record of it?"[7] For Kant, the answer is "no," because as a general rule, if someone could deny holding a deposit on the basis that they would not be found out, the practice of deposits would not survive; trust would be undermined. Hegel's point is that the example presupposes the validity of property *qua* property prior to the application of pure reason to determine lawfulness in regard of property. Hegel's criticism, like that of natural law, concerns the conceit of using *bourgeois* property as the basis for universal law.

4. Hegel, *Natural Law*, 56–70.
5. Ibid., 63.
6. Ibid., 114.
7. Kant, Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals, 25.

For both Kant and the theorists of natural law, it remains the isolated and abstract individual that contractually comes together to form society, whereas for Hegel culture is a self-contained whole that must be understood in terms of its own laws and dispositions; for Hegel it is not the individual, but the state that is prior. Legality cannot be derived from universal principles, but only be exhibited in the light of the living individuality of a given nation. Therefore, to apply the transcendental method in the realm of social thought is, like natural law, to impose a false unity that obfuscates real social relations. As Rose says, "a transcendental account necessarily presupposes the actuality or existence of its object and seeks to discover the conditions of its possibility."[8]

Rose and Social Theory: The Diremption of Theoretical and Practical Reason

For Rose, the key problem of Kant's legacy is most acutely felt in the split Kant introduces between theoretical and practical reason and the place of freedom therein: legality (determinism) and morality (autonomy). Kant sets out the *a priori* conditions for moral experience, induced through the categorical imperative, the unconditional rational form for moral thought that all rational beings should follow. The imperative relies not on treating others as a means to an end but on the value placed on humanity as a whole, an imperative to determine law in the direction of the Kingdom of Ends. The problem arises because in this scheme, God is reduced to a postulate of practical reason (necessarily posited to secure the ground of the Kingdom of Ends beyond the law). Rendering God a postulate as such renders God unknowable, which in turn renders freedom unknowable and therefore impossible. As Rose says, freedom cannot be conceived by Kant because it depends upon the prior distinction between the necessity (theoretical reason/legality) and freedom (practical reason/morality). Freedom can only be conceived in a negative sense: freedom *from* necessity.[9] As Rose explains: "For Kant . . . freedom means freedom from the sensuous world, from the necessity of nature. To Hegel this notion of freedom is 'a flight from the finite.' The rigid dichotomy between the sensuous world (the finite, nature) and the supersensuous world (the infinite, freedom) prevents the comprehension of either. By degrading empirical existence in order to emphasize that the infinite is utterly different, the infinite is itself debased.

8. Rose, *Hegel contra Sociology*, 1.
9. Rose, Hegel contra Sociology, 55.

For it is deprived of all characterization, and hence turned into an empty abstraction, an idol, made of mere timber."[10]

The above quote provides a context for her repeated claim in *Hegel contra Sociology* that Hegel's philosophy has *no* social import if the absolute is banished or suppressed, if the absolute cannot be thought.[11] For Rose, the idea of all Hegel's thought is to unify theoretical and practical reason. When Hegel employs reason [*Vernunft*], he implies the identity of the subject and object, because reason is the condition of actuality. And when Hegel speaks of Absolute knowledge, he is naming a particular standpoint of reason, the standpoint from which the sets of relations that allow thought to work the way it does are shown to be the determinations that are constative of being.[12] For Hegel, the task of philosophy is not to set out what can and cannot be known, or in what capacity, but the articulation of the determinations of actuality. Hegel's speculative idealism, as opposed to Kant's abstract idealism, is therefore characterized by a concern for the relationship between self-consciousness and the forms of institutions that give rise to sociality. Hegel's idealism demands of philosophical thought that it not be undertaken as a purely analytical exercise in a vacuum from the constitutive communities that make thought possible in the first place.

Girard's Comic Hypothesis

At this point, I want to consolidate Rose's Hegelian critique of social theory by way of critically engaging René Girard's provocative "Comic Hypothesis." Published the same year as *Violence and the Sacred*, it provides a complementary thesis on mimesis only from the perspective of comedy. Rose has critiqued Girard's *Violence and the Sacred* in her later work *The Broken Middle*, and so the aim of this section is to develop her critique of Girard and highlight the continuity of her early and later critical approach, while keeping the role of comedy and social theory to the fore.

Girard makes the argument for a universal anthropological theory of violence and sacrifice to which the Gospels offer an exceptional alternative. According to Girard, violence can be traced back to the mimetic character of desire. We desire not simply in our capacity as autonomous individuals (Girard's critique of Hegel), nor for the intrinsic value of an object as such, but intersubjectively. We desire things because they are already desired by another; desire is mimetic and, in the round of desire, the competition for

10. Ibid., 98.
11. Ibid., 42.
12. Dudley, Understanding German Idealism, 146.

an object or status inevitably leads to mimetic rivalry. Murderous violence is only averted through a scapegoat mechanism (a third). A sacrificial victim must be found to focus their collective envy. The death of the scapegoat placates the aggression and re-establishes the social bond. However, the mechanism of the scapegoat is characteristically obscured—the basis of all mythological thinking—because the scapegoat is a substitute victim, not chosen for any intrinsic quality as such. The Gospels are the exception to the extent that they are written from the perspective of the innocent victim, and hence expose the mechanism for what it is: a myth that sustains arbitrary violence.

In "A Comic Hypothesis," Girard presents mimetic theory as the unifying theory behind the classically given distinction between tragedy and comedy. As Girard says: "[C]omedy and tragedy . . . are very close to each other."[13] The essay proceeds through structural comparison of the similarities between Moliere's *Bourgeois gentleman* and Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex*, and moves to highlight the mutual catharsis in both comedy and tragedy, which Girard allies to ritual expulsion and purification. Laughter, he tells us, "must get rid of something."[14] When we laugh "we are really laughing at something which could and, in a sense, which should happen to anyone who laughs, not excluding ourselves." This, Girard argues, "clearly shows the nature of the threat, unperceived yet present, which laughter is always warding off, the still unidentified object it has to expel."[15]

Nowhere is this more evident that the tickle, the proto-joke. The laughter elicited from a tickle relies on both the real threat to one's ability to control the environment, while at the same time that threat being nil: the conditions for laughter are contradictory. This is the perilous balance. Girard offers tickling as the proto-mimetic act that can be understood as a joyous de-realization of our senses. The moment of laughter is precisely the moment one's very physiological being is scapegoated, only internally, rather than externally—rather than expel another in the round of sacrifice and violence, one expels oneself. That is to say, laughter is dependent upon expelling all air from the lungs, henceforth rendering the subject helpless, succumbing to the very condition he or she seeks to ward off. Moreover, as Arron Schuster puts it, the tickle is "the Ur-joke, the zero-degree of comedy" and "the primordial manifestation of culture"; "tickling stands as the momentous entry-point into the universe of simulation, or to cite the

13. Girard, "Perilous Balance," 821

14. Ibid., 815.

15. Ibid., 818.

Greek term, mimesis."[16] If mimesis is the basis of comedy and culture, then laughter is what prevents mimesis from descending into murderous rivalry, expelling the obscure object by turning it on oneself.

Girard and Natural Law

At first sight, it might appear counterintuitive to claim of the above that Girard offers us a variant of natural law to the extent that he begins not with the abstract individual but from the intersubjectivity of desire. However, Girard's theory bears all the hallmarks of a form of scientific empiricism, a variant of the positivist tradition of sociology; it extrapolates from comedy the presence of more "natural" laughter to reveal the truth of the scapegoating mechanism and explain the constitution of society as a whole. For Girard, the laughter that erupts from the tickle is a kind of cosmic echo of the protosocial gesture, the original violent sacrifice. As Rose would later critically argue of Girard: "[V]iolence is here not so much 'hypothesized' as hypostatized."[17] Or, to develop Hegel's critique of Kant, mimetic rivalry is understood within the transcendental register, it functions as the *a priori* principle, the key to sacrifice. In the first instance, this renders violence unknowable as evidenced by Girard's claim that violence becomes that "beautiful totality whose beauty depends on its being inaccessible and impenetrable."[18] Because without the empirical appreciation of the historic forms of sacrifice feeding back into his understanding of violence and sacrifice in the first place, only what counts as sacrificial-violence is violence. One might enquire for example as to the degree his encoding of sacrificial violence is already determined by the patriarchy of his discourse?

In the second instance, Girard's account owes something to *bourgeois* property law or rather, a John Milbank puts it, Girard maps liberal social theory into his sociological anthropology to the extent he assumes a prereligious and precultural chaos of desire. Desire, in its natural state, is nonhierarchical (in the sense that desire might be the desire for an objective good), it is desire only for that which others desire. It follows from this, that the original scene assumes one of competing equals (i.e., *bourgeois* property relations) with the inevitable violence as result of that competition. In other words, Girard's appeal to a "natural scene," like his appeal to laughter, takes its assumptions from the liberal coding of society of which violence is the principle outcome and religion (myth/laughter) is invented as a secondary

16. Schuster, "A Philosophy of Tickling."
17. Rose, The Broken Middle, 151.
18. Girard, Violence and the Sacred, 157.

phenomenon, designed to deal with the crisis of desire. Thus, as Milbank point out, Girard remains entirely within the functionalist definition of religion.[19]

Part II: The Speculative Moment of Comedy

Key to Rose's reading of Hegel is the significance she attaches to Hegel's speculative reasoning [*begreifenden*]. To take an example from grammar as Hegel does, to understand a proposition "speculatively" means that "the identity which is affirmed between subject and predicate is seen equally to affirm a lack of identity between subject and predicate." In other words, in reading a given proposition, one should not assume the identity of the given subject as already contained in the predicate [Hegel's critique of natural law], but rather see it as a work, something to be "achieved."[20]

For example, read speculatively, "God exists" does not predicate the raw attribute of existence to an empty name, but as Rose says, it "implies that we, finite beings, are not free. God is a pictorial, imaginative name for something which ordinary consciousness finds impossible to conceive," that is, the relation of the finite to the infinite. Read speculatively, the claim God exists "refers to our experience that, as particular individuals, we are not immediately universal, we are not species, not God, not infinite, that we live in societies where our experience as individuals does not correspond to the experience of all . . . we are limited, but can become aware of the determinations of the limit."[21] This means that any recognition constitutive of "knowing" is also misrecognition. Likewise, to speak of the absolute speculatively is to speak of the work that must be put into thinking the social; the absolute, for Hegel, is not an entity, but a *process*, undertaken speculatively.

Throughout *Hegel contra Sociology*, Rose insists that the identity of religion and the state is the fundamental speculative proposition of Hegel's thought; or rather, the *speculative experience of the lack of identity* between religion and the state is the basic object of Hegel's exposition. As Žižek later explains, commenting directly upon the above passage, to read the proposition speculatively is not to assert their mutual identity (theocracy), nor to see it as a wistful aspiration. Rather, it is to recognize that, where the state is founded upon religion, religion is given expression in a perverted way, not for reasons concerning the inadequacy of state institutions, but for the insufficiency articulated in the notion of religion itself: "[T]he inadequacy

19. Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 394.

20. Rose, *Hegel contra Sociology,* 49; Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 38.

21. Rose, Hegel contra Sociology 94.

of the actual state to the Christian religion *qua* its foundations corresponds to and has its ground in the inadequacy of the Christian religion itself to its own Notion."[22] In other words, the lack of identity between the two is a reflection of a lack inherent in the initial notion.

Rose reads Hegel in a manner that, as the above indicates, informs Žižek. This is not the triumphalist Hegel for whom the phenomenology legitimizes "the phantasy of historical completion with the imprimatur of suprahistorical, absolute method, but focuses relentlessly on the historical production and reproduction of those illusionary contraries which other systems of scientific thought naturalise, absolutize, or deny."[23] In Rose's reading, Truth in the absolute ethical life arises, as Žižek would say, from misrecognition, the basis of comedy.[24]

The Comedy of Hegel

Read from the speculative standpoint, Hegel's *Phenomenology* unveils the series of contradictions that arise when one starts from the *a priori* separation of the subject from the conditions of its formation. The various categories Hegel develops, such as the unhappy conscience or the beautiful soul, sketch out the historical consequences of the split that arises when the autonomy of the subject is posited as separate from the substance (totality) of ethical life, and thereby afflict the substance of ethical life.[25] The *Phenomenology* on her reading is a kind of *Divina Comedia*,[26] a comedy of misrecognition: "Let me shoot from the pistol: first, *spirit* in the *Phenomenology* means the *drama of misrecognition* which ensures at every stage and transition of the work—a ceaseless comedy, according to which our aims and outcomes constantly mismatch each other, and provoke yet another revised aim, action and discordant outcome. Secondly, *reason* is therefore *comic*, full of surprises, of unanticipated happenings, so that the comprehension is always provisional and preliminary."[27]

The *Phenomenology* is not the revocation of alienated externalization, nor a teleology of reconciliation, nor a dominating absolute knowledge. The *Phenomenology* is not a success, it is a gamble. For the perpetual occurrence of inversion and misrepresentation can only be undermined, or "brought

22. Žižek For They Know Not What They Do, 104.
23. Rose, Dialectic of Nihilism, 3.
24. Žižek, "The Truth Arises from Misrecognition: Part I," 190.
25. Abbinett, Truth and Social Science, 22.
26. Rose, Mourning Becomes the Law, 75.
27. Ibid., 72.

into fluidity" by *allusion* to the law of their determination, to the causality of fate.[28]

Hegel on Comedy

If there is a criticism of Rose to be made at this point, it is by her own admission that what concerns her is "not what Hegel says about comedy as such, but *the movement of the Absolute as comedy*."[29] Hegel had already linked the role of dialectical thinking to the comic as such. His insight that the nature of thinking is dialectical and as such understanding must fall into contradiction was of capital importance to his project[30] and comic action posed the contradiction between what is absolutely true and its realization in individuals more profoundly than other aesthetic forms.[31] The implication here is that comedy is not merely an instance of dialectical play; rather, as Stephen Law has argued, Hegel sees comedy playing a key role in the development of humankind, contributing to the growth of Spirit and freedom.

In the aesthetics (to take Hegel's later works first), poetry, of which comedy is a subset, like all art, gives expression to the absolute to the extent it expresses the relation between the human (particular) and divine (universal); it is the work of negation in service of the absolute ethical life;[32] and "[t]he only important thing for a work of art [within which comedy is discussed] is to present what corresponds with reason and spiritual truth."[33] Art is only truly art if it fulfills its supreme task, "when it has placed itself in the same sphere as religion and philosophy, and when it is simply one way of bringing to our minds and expressing the Divine, the deepest interests of mankind, and the most comprehensive truths of the spirit . . . . Art shares this vocation with religion and philosophy, but in a special way, namely by displaying even the highest [reality] sensuously, bringing it thereby nearer to the senses, to feeling, and to nature's mode of appearance."[34]

In the *Phenomenology*, Hegel introduces comedy under the subheading "The Spiritual Work of Art." The section dialectically sets out the way art has represented the relation of the human to divine, the particular to the universal. In epic narrative, the narrator represents the gods through speech,

28. Rose, *Hegel contra* Sociology, 159.
29. Rose, Mourning Becomes the Law, 64.
30. Hegel The Encyclopaedia Logic, §11.
31. Hegel, *Aesthetics*, 1201.
32. Ibid., 7.
33. Ibid., 1197.
34. Ibid., 7.

with the narrative medium depicting the actions of the gods (universal) as the actions of men (the particular); by way of negation, in dramatic tragedy it is the actions of the actor—as opposed to speech—that represents the gods. Yet in both cases, the relation between the two (universal/particular) is posed as s synthetic combination: the universal remains external to the individual.[35] In epic narrative, the gods' actions may well take the form of men's actions, but the universal remains unrestricted and withdrawn from the connection. In tragic drama, the split is manifest in the actor's employment of a mask: the actor *qua* acting may well represent a god, but only in the capacity of an actor.[36] In comedy, we encounter the final spiritual work of art, the negation of the negation. In comedy, "The self-consciousness of the hero must step forth from his mask."[37] In comedy "the actual self of the actor coincides with what he impersonates";[38] comedy sits as it does for Kierkegaard, a zone of transition to revealed religion, that is, Christianity. In Christianity, God appears directly as a particular individual and therefore Christianity *is* the religion of comedy while true comedy implicitly points beyond art to religion. Read from the perspective of comedy, Hegel and Kierkegaard appear much closer together than is usually accredited.

Tragedy and Comedy

For Hegel, comedy is situated further along the road to freedom: "The actualization of freedom in the aesthetic sphere is nascent in tragedy and fully developed in comedy. The reason is that truly *tragic* action necessarily presupposes either a live conception of *individual* freedom and independence or at least an individual's determination and willingness to accept freely and on his own account the responsibility for his own act and its consequences."[39]

For Hegel, a tragic plot turns on two independently valid yet irreconcilable positions. In Hegel's reading of *Antigone*, for example, Antigone honors her brother, and thus represents the "bond of kinship, the gods of the underworld." Creon by contrast "honors Zeus alone, the dominating power over public life and social welfare." As Hegel argues, notwithstanding the validity of their purpose, they carry it out in a one-sided manner, unable

35. Hegel, Phenomenology of Spirit, 441.
36. Ibid., 450.
37. Ibid.
38. Ibid., 452.
39. Hegel, *Aesthetics,* 1205.

not to infringe upon others.[40] However, as Hegel also maintains, there remains within the tragic drama a moment of reconciliation in as much as the dramatic representation of two irreconcilable yet valid standpoints precludes the audience from taking sides; in this way, the audience is spared the one-sidedness of reflection that besets the tragic characters of the drama: contradiction is turned into reconciliation.[41]

Tragedy encapsulates the contradiction between autonomy and determination; the characters' standpoint and the wider determining events between. In tragedy, external circumstances take precedence over the subjective positions in a way that leads to misfortune. For the emergence of comedy, however, Hegel tells us, "there must have asserted itself in a still higher degree the free right of the subjective personality and its self-assured dominion."[42] In this sense, comedy is a radicalization of tragedy (both poles). Both dramatic forms rely on the contradiction between the aims of a character and the external situation, however, "in a comic action the contradiction between what is absolutely true and its realization in individuals is posed more profoundly" and therefore requires a more stringent solution. In contrast to tragedy, "what is destroyed in this [comic] solution cannot be either fundamental principle or individual character."[43] As Stephen Law succinctly puts it, "in tragedy, the choice is given: either autonomy or determination; the protagonist must choose. In comedy, the subject can always rise above the contradiction. In comedy, it is us who decide the forms of behaviour; comedy needs no gods because comics are. We dispense justice and the penalty."[44] While in tragedy the protagonist's commitment to a set of values results in his or death, in comedy the protagonist survives and freedom shines through.[45] Comedy thereby takes art to its limit: beyond comedy, there is no further *Aesthetic* manifestation of freedom, there is only religion and philosophy.

By way of an example, one might consider Roberto Benigni's tragicomedy *La Vita Bella* (1996) in which he plays Guido, a Jewish Italian Bookseller who, upon being interned in a concentration camp with his son (Giosuè) and wife (Dora), constructs an imaginative and alternate worldview to shield his son from the true horror. Following a set of given tasks such as hide-n-seek, rewarded by points, the first child to reach a thousand points will win a

40. Ibid., 1197.
41. Ibid., 1199.
42. Ibid., 1205.
43. Ibid., 1201.
44. Law, "Hegel and the Spirit of Comedy," 117.
45. Huddleston, "Hegel on Comedy," 11.

tank. At the level of tragedy, Guido, whose virtue remains intact throughout the film, is eventually shot, overcome by the external circumstances. Yet at the level of comedy, he is able to rise above the contradiction between autonomy and determination to the extent he is also able to determine the external circumstances in the sense that in the end his fantasy construction is vindicated. When the U.S. Army arrives to liberate the camp, at its helm is a Sherman tank in which the Giosuè is driven away to safety.

What then does Girard make of the distinction between comedy and tragedy? Comedy, Girard argues, lends itself to structural effects rather than what arises from an individual's character. In other words, comedy shifts the focus from the individual to the pattern of life itself. Comedy demands passions that are identical; whereas tragedy demands "unique sentiments."[46] And it is by virtue of its immediacy and "structural" component that Girard also considers comedy a radicalization of tragedy, only now for the opposite reasons: comedy is more crushing than tragedy: "[T]he vengeance of the gods, meaninglessness of destiny, and the malice of the 'human condition' may well crush the individual but not to the extent they do in the case of comic patterns which are truly 'structural' in the sense that they dominate individual reactions and fully account for them . . . whereas individual thinking is unable to take them into account. The structural patters of the comic therefore deny the sovereignty of the individual more radically than either god or destiny."[47]

Laughter, for Girard, is further along toward a negative reaction to a given threat. If, for Hegel, the tragic hero is crushed by external situation all the while maintain fidelity to a given set of values, for Girard, it is the *comic* who is more determinately crushed by a situation in which even the very values are destroyed. Whereas for Hegel, comedy is marked by a sovereignty of the subject to the extent they can change the determinate situation, for Girard, the comic's very being is eclipsed by the sacrificial mechanism and its arbitrary sway. For Hegel, comedy implies the radicalization of both the subjective and objective elements; Girard's view of comedy radicalizes only the objective and hence remains entirely on the side of the tragic.

Part III: Girard, Žižek, and the Broken Middle

Rose takes up her critique of Girard in *The Broken Middle* where she extends (considerably) her critique of dualisms in the light of Hegel. Only now, the speculative position is identified as the broken middle: "[A]ll dualistic

46. Girard, "A Perilous Balance," 817.

47. Ibid., 816.

relations to 'the other,' to 'the world' are attempts to quieten and deny the broken middle, the third term which arises out of misrecognition." This "third term" is law: "My relation to myself is mediated by what I recognize or refuse to recognize in your relation to yourself; while your self-relation depends on what you recognize of my relation to myself." The law, "in all its various historical adventures—[is] the comedy of misrecognition." And this makes the meaning of law inseparable from the meaning of *Bildung*, that is, education, formation, and cultivation, the work of which *is* the work of love.[48]

In *The Broken Middle*, Rose turns to Kierkegaard to develop a "phenomenology of law": How does Law appear to consciousness? The "middle" is a third space, not the agnostic and unitary space of secular liberalism, but a place of anxiety to the extent it is the sheer givenness of the political and ethical situation that resists any attempt to posit either a retreat into sanctified origins or utopian ends. The concern of politics is not to provide a solution that sutures the diremptions of modern life, such as morality and legality, religion and the state, because those fields, as Hegel appreciated, already arise out of the process of diremptions.[49] Her aim then is to recover anxiety within our political and ethical discourse, "re-assigning it to the middle."[50]

And it is precisely this type of anxious labor toward "Absolute knowing" that Girard resists. As Rose highlights, Girard is a gnostic, that is, a dualist, because the victim mechanism of scapegoating implies creation, in the first instance, is evil, the result of a "violent demiurge demanding violent sacrifice" in the face of a "chaos of undifferentiated mimesis" that can only momentarily be suspended.[51] All the while, the Godhead, the Christian exception to myth, the god of love, sees humanity not as sinful as such, merely unenlightened as to the truth of mimetic theory, although the sociological foundation in chaos remains. In other words, he overemphasized the distinction between the violence of the scapegoat mechanism (nature), and the love, and God (grace) such that freedom is only ever freedom from the basic mechanism he posits of culture, that is, the negative rejection of the mechanism with only the Christian counter sacrifice as abstract principle. Theologically, as Milbank points out, this amounts to the adoption of an extrinsic God[52] and thus affirms the autonomy of the secular realm. As An-

48. Rose, Mourning Becomes the Law, 74–75.
49. Rose, The Broken Middle, 286.
50. Lloyd, "On the Uses of Gillian Rose," 699.
51. Rose, The Broken Middle, 147.
52. Milbank, Theology and Social Theory, 394.

drew Shanks put it, Girard's is an attempt to think "from the outside about religion, as opposed rather than the type of thinking that springs right from the very middle of a community's existential brokenness."[53]

The Severe Style

Little wonder Rose characterized Girard's writing in terms of the "severe style"—a cognate of what Kierkegaard called the ethical. How so? "The severe style" is taken from Hegel's aesthetic writings; it is her judgment upon his early Jena writings, serving as a propaedeutic to the political task. As Rose writes, "the political problem could not be solved in the severe style."[54] The

> severe style is that higher abstraction of beauty which clings to what is important and expresses and presents it in its chief outlines, but still despises charm and grace, grants domination to the topic alone, and above all does not devote much industry and elaboration to accessories. Thus the severe style still limits itself to reproducing what is present and available. In other words, while on the one hand, in *content* it rests, in respect of ideas and presentation, on the given, e.g. on the present sacrosanct religious tradition, on the other hand, for the external *form* it allows complete liberty to the topic and not to its own invention.[55]

To clarify the above, one could say that the severe style makes no concession to the role of subjectivity; to put the matter in Kierkegaard's terms, it is concerned with the *what*, not the *how*, of subjectivity: the "severe style sharply repulses any subjective judgement."[56] So the point Rose is making is that Girard's work cannot answer the political question precisely because politics requires something of risk in negotiating the middle, that is, law; herein lies its "absence of irony—or its dramatic cognates, humor or facetiousness—in the presentation of a theory."[57]

53. Shanks, *Against Innocence*, 107.
54. Rose, Hegel contra Sociology, 51.
55. Hegel, *Aesthetics*, 616–17.
56. Ibid., 620.
57. Rose, *The Broken Middle*, 141.

The Standpoint of Faith

In *Hegel contra Sociology,* the severe style is contrasted with the speculative disposition towards the absolute ethical life; in *The Broken Middle* the severe style is contrasted with Kierkegaard's category of the "ethical," that is, the realm of universal law. Kierkegaard identified the religious stage with the exception to the rule; the religious stage invites the "suspension" of the ethical in a moment of faith, as exemplified for Kierkegaard by the Akedah.

For Girard, employing the *a priori* form of sacrificial reasoning, the story of Abraham and Isaac amounts to a condensed form of mimetic theory, charting both the call for infant sacrifice and its replacement by animal sacrifices, which itself stands not simply as a replacement for Isaac but a portent of the sacrifice to come in Christ: the end of animal sacrifice points to the end of the sacrificial mechanism *qua* sacrifice.

By contrast, Rose takes Kierkegaard's line: Abraham may well be accorded the title "father of faith," yet understood ethically, Abraham set out to "murder" Isaac.[58] What gives Abraham his greatness therefore cannot be his moral code, but rather the fidelity he maintains to God's word, that is, his ability to suspend the social in its ethical considerations, maintaining instead a passionate commitment to God: the teleological suspension of the ethical. As Rose says, expanding on Kierkegaard:

> [T]o adopt the standpoint of faith is to be willing to stake oneself in the middle, between the arbiter of law (the sovereign will) and the victim. Faith is this in-between: to occupy the middle is to take precisely a stance on love and violence. Faith: acknowledges violence in love and the love in violence because the law is in both: the violence in love—Abraham's exclusive, violent love of Isaac; the love in violence—his willingness to bind Isaac with faith not with resignation, not with the prospect of loss, but a free offering, freely given—oblation not sacrifice. It is this witness alone—this always already knowing yet being willing to stakes oneself again—that prevents one from becoming an arbitrary perpetrator or an arbitrary victim; that prevents one, actively or passively, from acting with arbitrary violence. Such witnessing is always ready—it is therefore the beginning in the middle: the middle in the beginning—holding itself alert in the anxiety and equivocation of each.[59]

58. Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 30.

59. Rose, The Broken Middle, 148–49.

Rose and Tragedy

Yet here the charge may be laid that Rose fails to appreciate fully the comic mode Hegel sets out in distinction to tragedy. As Milbank puts it, by situating herself within the broken middle, she both accepts Hegel's radicalization of Kantian dualisms while being resigned to them. For this reason her ethics come across as "chastend, tragic, and less jocular gloss, a form of postmodern impossibilism, the new opium of the intellectual . . . a Hegelian variant on hopelessness."[60] Indeed, if comedy amounts to the pathos of misrecognition, is not comedy turned into its very opposite? Take for example her conclusion to *The Broken Middle*: the more the middle is dirempted the more it becomes sacred in ways that figure its further diremptions. Said otherwise, we try to heal the splits by which we negotiate society with imagined "holy" middles (i.e., utopian goals) without appreciating the ways we further ratify the very splits. So, while comedy maintains a social-critical task to the extent it makes the failings of individuals and in particular the failings of contemporary society its prime focus, it also remains captive to them. Arguably, it is a reading further ratified by Rowan Williams evaluation of her comic sensibility when he situates her comedy under the "sadness of the King," that is, our brokenness.[61]

Or, by way of a further example, consider her critique of Holocaust piety in film. What she refuses in the representation of fascism is the standpoint of the voyeur, that is, one in which the viewer remains distant from the events, unimplemented, while allowing that subject nonetheless a cathartic revulsion or infinite pity to manifest—a case of what Girard would call, scapegoating. The point is not simply to defend our interests over and against the other, but to encounter violence legitimized by our own sense of the individual moral will. Hence her proclivity toward Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day* over Spielberg's *Schindler's List*. In the former, the attraction for German Nazism is drawn out through the organization of the English aristocratic household and the collusion of servants with masters; the viewer is not left intact. In the latter, the evil of the genocide is rendered into an unfathomable and unforgivable crime that precludes the inner tendency we can all bear toward fascism.[62]

60. Milbank, "On the Paraethical," 78.
61. Williams, "The Sadness of the King," 1.
62. Rose, Mourning Becomes the Law, 54.

A Kenotic Reading of Girard

There remains however another way to read Girard, which takes into account the kenotic trajectory of Hegel's thought. Recall Hegel's description of comedy *qua* representation: comedy marks the end of aesthetic representation (and thus art in general) in the sense that in comedy the actual self of the actor coincides with what he impersonates. There is a kenotic logic at play here that mirrors Hegel's kenotic Christology. According to Hegel, God initially divests himself of abstract substance by contracting into man (Jesus coincides with what he impersonates) to then be finally self-emptied on the cross (the exemplary of love) such that "what dies on the cross is indeed God himself, not just his 'finite container' but the God of the beyond."[63] Following this double self-divestment, the single individual reestablishes the relation to the Absolute *qua* the community (Spirit) of believers (the synthesis of the individual and universal), and takes on the contingency of belief. As Žižek says, Spirit refers directly to the corporal body of faithful: "[the] Holy Spirit of their community."[64]

For Žižek, ritual or ceremonial precepts often operate on the assumption of a metaphysical Other to which a given sacrifice is offered. Yet as Žižek remarks of the very title of Girard's work, *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*, while it implies in a gnostic vein some terrifying and mysterious power overseeing and sustaining the sacrificial process, it masks the realization that there is no big Other:[65] the law is grounded in its own tautology. And herein is the key to rereading Girard. Because the gospel story is told from the perspective of the innocent victim rather than the mob it renders the entire contingency of sacrificial violence transparent, it exposes the impotence of the ritual or a supposed Master to appease. In this way, it brings into question the entire efficiency of the scapegoat mechanism. In other words, there is a kenotic logic involved in Girard's hypothesis, such that once we discern the Christian revelation of truth in this regard, that is, the truth by which the sacred is deprived of its power; we step out from the mask of myth (sacrificial violence) and assume the subsequent responsibility. In this sense, to read Girard in kenotic terms is to say that we can no longer pretend that scapegoating is anything other than arbitrary violence to contain mimesis and our choice to participate in the mob is precisely that, a self-grounding choice. Or rather, read from the perspective of Žižek, Girard's work returns us to the primacy of the political, Rose's

63. Žižek, "Dialectical Clarity versus the Misty Conceit of Paradox," 257.

64. Ibid., 282–83.

65. Žižek, Less Than Nothing, 972.

middle: "What the inexistence of the big Other signals is that every ethical and/ or moral edifice has to be grounded in an abyssal act which is, in the most radical sense imaginable, political. Politics is the very space in which, without any external guarantee, ethical decisions are made and negotiated [the broken middle]. The idea that one can ground politics in ethics, or that politics is ultimately a strategic effort to realize prior ethical positions, is a version of the illusion of the 'big Other.'"[66]

In this way, Žižek makes good on Girard in a way that avoids the severity of Rose's critique. Seen from the perspective of Žižek, Girard's distinction between myth and gospel might be reworked in terms of Hegel's distinction between tragedy and comedy, where comedy functions precisely as a kenotic moment in which socio-symbolic is suspended, through the irruption of laughter. That is to say, one occupies the position of risk, from which the middle comes into view, this is the speculative moment, when the political coincides with the religious in a way which exposes their mutual relation in their lack of identity; there is no big Other.

Conclusion

By way of conclusion, one might pose the question: What might the foregiven argument mean for ecclesial self-understanding? Here, one need only recall Girard's account of laughter as the proto-kenotic gesture constitutive of society. That being the case, it might be argued that comedy, not tragedy, logically stands at the foundation of Creation and likewise, Christ was not born out of tragic necessity, rather, Christianity arose at the point at which God was tickled by Jesus, tickled by himself in the way that only the kenotic laughter of Trinitaian difference could account for, that the event of gospel truth has happened, and now it is up to us; laughter is not subsequent to our brokeness but the laughter of brokeness. This comedy of the absolute, I wager, stands as the propaedeutic to a given political task, restoring not just anxiety but *mirth* also to the speculative middle.

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66. Žižek, Less Than Nothing, 963.

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