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Žižek, Milbank, and the Broken Middle

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I Žižek and Theology

At the risk of reduction, much of Žižek's oeuvre can be said to be concerned with the singular question: how does one perform a critical gesture? This is principally worked across three fields in which he stakes his interest: i) ideology; ii) the politics of the Left; iii) psychoanalysis. To take the first – ideology – the question may be framed thus: to what extent are our actions or thoughts already shaped by the given political or cultural hegemony? To take the second – the politics of the Left – how does one address the loss of its revolutionary impetus? (In this regard Žižek recalls Marx's famous eleventh thesis on Feuerbach: "Philosophers have hitherto only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it" (Žižek 2001a: 149). To take the third, the question may be posed in terms of how one breaks the fundamental phantasy which structures neurotic *jouissance*?

If psychoanalysis plays a particularly prominent role in Žižek's early work, it is not simply because Lacan's account of phantasy offers a perspective on the way ideology and law function, it is also because it offers a model of revolutionary practice, albeit at the level of the individual: it posits the possibility that an analysand can traverse the phantasy that structures his/her neurotic *jouissance*; i.e. break with neurotic repetition. Žižek was already making the link between Christian theology and the critical traversal/act in his early works, mediated by his reading of Rene Girard (Žižek 2001: 56). This takes on an increased tenor in his later work where he cites the biblical figure Job as the first critic of ideology/metaphysics (Žižek 2003: 125); draws significantly on Kierkegaard's 'suspension of the ethical' as the paradigm of the critical act (Žižek 2006: 75-80); and places his thought clearly in line with Hegel's 'death-of-God' theology: what dies on the cross is not just God but the God of metaphysics, the God of the beyond; i.e., the big Other (Žižek 2009a). Little wonder then that theologians have in some measure found favour with his work. By drawing

on theology in this way he offers a riposte to the three 'masters of suspicion': Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche. Against Marx's claim that Christianity is a bourgeois ideology complicit with capitalism, Žižek suggests that Christianity offers the very critique of that ideology; against Freud who at times reduced Christianity to a superstitious codification of the moral law, Žižek places Christianity above the ethical at the vanguard of revolutionary praxis; and against Nietzsche, who thought Christianity too otherworldly, Žižek pushes the materialist (albeit Hegelian) credentials of Christianity: God became man.

More recently, and not without recognizing to an extent the "important" theological witness Žižek's work bears, a strong challenge has been mounted by the British theologian John Milbank (Milbank 2009: 111). The thrust of the argument is neatly encapsulated in the sub-title of Milbank and Žižek's *The Monstrosity of Christ: Paradox or Dialectics?* This distinction can stand in for a number of related debates: Catholic community verses Protestant individualism; Christianity versus post-modern nihilism; analogy verses univocity; Chesterton versus Hegel. More specifically, the distinction pertains to two different ways of ontologizing contradiction:

for Hegel, contradiction means tension, conflict, the violence of negativity i.e., the Hegelian Whole is a Whole kept together by a process of internal antagonisms; whereas the Catholic Whole is one of divine transcendence in which opposites miraculously coincide, in which the incompatible are one. (Žižek 2009b: 252)

By way of entering the debate, I want to turn to a third voice: Gillian Rose, the cult philosopher and late sister of Jacqueline Rose. (My choice is not incidental. Rose maintains a spectral presence behind these figures. Žižek was inciting his audience as early as 1991 to "grasp the fundamental paradox of the *speculative identity* as it was recently restated by Gillian Rose" (Žižek 2002: 103), and later on describes her formulation of Hegel's 'Substance as Subject' as "perspicacious" (105). Likewise, Milbank acknowledges that his own work *Theology and Social Theory* "would not have been conceivable without the writings of Gillian Rose" (Milbank 1990: vii). In particular he credits her in his Chapter "For and Against Hegel". Milbank is *for* Hegel "in the sense which Gillian Rose has shown" (147), and to which I shall return shortly. And in the *Monstrosity of Christ* Milbank notes that "Žižek's tragic (but also comic) reading of Hegel concurs in many ways (much more than most of her supporters are likely to concede) with that of Gillian Rose, whilst pushing her rendering to a much more consistent 'atheist' conclusion" (Milbank 2009: 112).

It can be said therefore that Rose plays a key role in the reception of Hegel by our two protagonists, and so to clarify her reading will clarify aspects of our protagonist's arguments. However, Rose's philosophical analysis also differs in key respects from both Žižek and Milbank's. By drawing on Rose I therefore hope to triangulate the debate in a manner which follows Lacan's tripartite scheme: the real, imaginary, and symbolic. Briefly put, one can map Žižek, Milbank, and Rose according to these three registers: Žižek is the 'theorist of the real'; Milbank's vision of harmony is suited to the imaginary; Rose is a theorist of law and hence the symbolic. My aim then is not to offer Rose up as a neat synthesis of the other two. In this regard one should recall Žižek's pronouncement of his tussle with Milbank: "The dialogue between Milbank and me (which like

every true philosophical dialogue, is an interaction of two monologues) seems to oscillate between these two extremes” (Žižek 2009b: 235). My aim is simply to break the deadlock of this debate with reference to a third, from which new discussion may be generated. I begin therefore with a brief introduction to Rose’s oeuvre before clarifying the relative positions of Žižek and Milbank à la Rose. In clarifying their positions I want to mobilize their respective readings of Sören Kierkegaard’s ‘teleological suspension of the ethical’. Three different positions will emerge relevant to Lacan’s topography of subjectivity.

II Rose contra Sociology

By way of introduction to Rose, let us consider in some detail the arguments of *Hegel contra Sociology*. Here, Rose sets about to “retrieve Hegelian speculative experience for social theory” (Rose 1981: 1), which in Hegelian terms amounts to the practical articulation of ‘Absolute knowing’ [*das absolute Wissen*]. Everything will hang on the specificity Rose awards these terms. More directly, her argument may be summarized thus: the historical development of social theory/sociology in all its variants, including the Marxism of the Frankfurt School, has remained captive to German neo-Kantianism, manifest in the way Kantian skepticism reproduces a series of philosophical dichotomies within sociological reason; i.e. the Kantian spit between subjective freedom and objective unfreedom, law and morality, is repeated in the sociological split between values and validity, or meaning/value (Weber) and structure/facts (Durkheim). Hegel’s critique of Kant, according to Rose, provides an argument in advance of sociology and a method by which to expound capitalism as a culture, without abandoning “the classical Marxist interest in political economy and in revolutionary practice” (220).

What then of the particular way in which she reads Hegel? Two planks are relevant here. First, “Hegel’s philosophy has no social import if the Absolute cannot be thought” (204). In other words, we cannot reproduce freedom socially if it cannot be represented in terms of the Absolute. Hence, where Marxists have inclined to ‘turn Hegel on his head’, employing his method whilst leaving it divested of idealist claims, Rose, impresses upon the reader the need to take Hegel at his most serious when it comes to the Absolute. At stake here for Hegel are the social implications of Kantian agnosticism. Kant’s philosophy makes God unknowable (a postulate of practical reason) and “this unknowableness becomes represented in the lack of freedom, in social and political relations” (92). As Rose explains through her critical reading of Hegel, for both Kant and Fichte freedom turns on freedom *from* the world of necessity; i.e. the realm of desire. And this dichotomy precludes the comprehension of either (98). If we debase the empirical and sensuous world in favour of articulating the infinite as the site of true freedom, we debase the infinite also, because we deprive it of character; the infinite becomes an “empty abstraction, an idol” (98). Likewise, by placing freedom on the side of the sensuous world (i.e. the application of practical reason in service of happiness) we reduce freedom to “the realm of sheer enjoyment” (98). And because a

rigid opposition is introduced, the only possible relationship to emerge can be one of domination from one side or the other: "The absolute can only be re-presented in terms of the prevailing dualisms, in terms of the domination between concept and intuition, between legal persons (master) and the thing (slave)" (92-93).

This takes us to the second plank of Rose's interpretation, the speculative proposition, and in particular it's "fundamental" form: "in general religion and the foundation of the state is [*sic*] one and the same thing; they are identical in and for themselves" (48). What is it to read a proposition speculatively? Ordinary statements divide the sentence into a subject and predicate, joined by the copula 'is'. Ordinary propositions affirm the identity of a fixed subject and variable accidents. Hence to read the above as such would impute a theocratic understanding to the proposition. However, as Rose explains:

Hegel knew that his thought would be misunderstood if it were read as a series of ordinary propositions [...] He thus proposed, in an unfortunately schematic statement, that the propositional form must be read as a 'speculative proposition. [...] To read 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. This reading implies an identity different from the merely formal one of the ordinary proposition. This different kind of identity cannot be pre-judged, that is, it cannot be justified in a transcendental sense, and it cannot be stated in a proposition of the kind to be eschewed. This different kind of identity must be understood as a result to be achieved. [...] The identity of religion and state is the fundamental speculative proposition of Hegel's thought, or, and this is to say the same thing, the *speculative experience of the lack of identity* between religion and state is the basic object of Hegel's exposition. (49)

Hegel's method is presented here not as the crude and formal machination of the dialectic on the road to achieving complete knowledge or truth, where knowledge and truth may be measured according to criteria of correctness. To read a proposition speculatively is not to assume the identity of the given subject (religion/state), but rather see it as a work, something to be "achieved" (49). As Žižek later explains, commenting directly upon the above passage, to read the proposition speculatively is not to assert their mutual identity (theocracy); nor 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 the insufficiency articulated in the notion of religion itself: "the inadequacy 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" (Žižek 2002: 104); i.e. the lack of identity between the two is a reflection of a lack inherent in the initial notion.

By way of a further example, one can trace this characteristic philosophical move through Žižek's transposition of the split between man and god into God himself. For Žižek, Job is the first critic of ideology to the extent he resists locating the meaning of his suffering in a big Other which organizes desires. But Job also serves as the precursor to Christ: Christ's suffering on the cross is also meaningless; i.e. it is not to be taken as sacrificial act of meaningful exchange in service of a

big Other (e.g. the *polis*) but a gratuitous act of love; a sacrifice of the very cause (Christ's death was the death of God). Hence the difference between Job and Christ, as Žižek explains, is that, "in the case of Christ, the gap that separates the suffering desperate man (Job) from God is transposed into God himself, as His own radical splitting or, rather, self-abandonment" (Žižek 2005a: unpaginated).

This account of speculative identity not only highlights Žižek's commitment to this train of thought, it also helps make sense of Rose's characterization of Hegel's *Phenomenology*: "The *Phenomenology* is not the revocation of alienated externalization, nor the teleology of reconciliation, nor a dominating absolute knowledge. The *Phenomenology* is not a success, it is a gamble" (Rose 1981: 159) which must dialectically sustain the contradictions, and in particular those pertaining to religion and the state, in a manner which does not fall into domination of one by the other, but labours in the very diremption. Rose's account neatly foreshadows Žižek's own description of the *Phenomenology*, highlighting his indebtedness to her own reading:

What is the *Phenomenology of Spirit* ultimately if not the presentation of a series of aborted attempts by the subject to define the Absolute and thus arrive at the longed-for-synchronism of the subject and object? This is why the final outcome ("absolute knowledge") does not bring about a finality found harmony but rather entails a kind of reflective inversion: it confronts the subject with the fact that *the true Absolute is nothing but the logical disposition of its previous failed attempts to conceive the Absolute* – that is, with the vertiginous experience that Truth itself coincides with the path towards Truth. (Žižek 2002: 99-100)

What then does it mean to articulate 'Absolute knowing'? Looking ahead to Rose's later work, one might call Hegel a thinker of the 'the *broken middle*'. The middle in question is the realm of 'law'; i.e. the social practices and institutions that constitute our world. And her thesis is, as Vincent Lloyd has so succinctly put it:

[P]hilosophy tends to obfuscate this middle, it tends to posit certain concepts as transcendence so that they cannot be further investigated: they are absolute. The middle is broken because it is always in error: institutions and practices are always imperfect; they always do some amount of harm. In the absence of an absolute, the way we react to what is left, to the "broken middle", is with anxiety. (Lloyd 2007: 699)

So where neo-Kantianism encourages us to fling ourselves on one or the other pole of the antithesis (freedom/unfreedom), Rose excavates the middle (with the help of Kierkegaard and Freud). Hence, this third space is not a unitary space (e.g. the neutral space of secular liberalism) but a place of anxiety to the extent it is the sheer 'givenness' of the situation which resists the retreat into sanctified beginnings or utopian ends. Her aim then is to recover this notion of anxiety, and "re-assigning it to the middle" (699).

In *The Broken Middle* Rose explores the implications of this middle in terms of, amongst others, post-structuralism, which is shown to be another variant of social theory:

postmodern thinking, would mend the diremption of law and ethics by turning struggle between universality, particularity, and singularity into a general sociology of control. Yet the security of this new spectatorship is undermined by the tension of freedom and unfreedom which it cannot acknowledge for it has disqualified the actuality of any oppositions which might initiate process and pain – any risk of coming to know. Instead tension between the contraries of subjective freedom and objective unfreedom appears as unconceptualised aporia – Event of Being, Incursion of the singular – as a singularity without its contraries of universal and particular [...]. Again and again, the diremption of law and ethics will emerge in these configurations. (Rose 1992: xiii)

Returning to Hegel, to labour towards 'Absolute knowing' is to call into question the dirempted middles which characterize neo-Kantian philosophy, "which has separated law from an uninvestigated transcendent which authorizes it" (Lloyd 2007: 701); it is to show the middle, "rendered not mended" (Rose 1992: 310). In other words the "comprehension to diremption involves reflection on what may be ventured – without mending diremption in heaven or on earth" (xv). Or, as Andrew Shanks puts it, Absolute knowing "is precisely the proper humility of thought – towards infinite vocation [...] it is truth-as-openness, essentially a trans-metaphysical enterprise [...], it is philosophy on the way to theology beyond metaphysics" (Shanks 2008: 41-42). If all this suggests that Rose is a religious thinker then, as Lloyd points out, this is to miss the point (Lloyd 2007: 701). Much of her polemical thrust toward theology concerns precisely the way theologies of both the left (which she identifies with Mark C. Taylor but who serves in advance of Žižek) and the right (which she identifies with John Milbank), blind us to the way our social institutions are fundamentally flawed, calling instead for either their elimination (Taylor/Žižek) or perfection (Milbank).

Hence 'holy' and 'sacred' in Rose's use are not terms of praise "they represent evasions of the investigation of the law itself" (701). As Rose says, 'These forced reconciliations of diremption in the 'new' forms of civil immediacy and holy mediation sanctify specific violence as they seek to surpass violence in general. The more the middle is dirempted the more it becomes sacred in ways that configure its further diremption.' (Rose 1992: 307) With this in mind, I want to turn now to Žižek and Milbank, exploring their positions relative to Rose. In clarifying their positions, I do so by way of their individual appropriation/interpretation of Kierkegaard's 'teleological suspension of the ethical' and it is this to which I shall first turn.

III Kierkegaard and the teleological suspension of the ethical

As Kierkegaard points out in *Fear and Trembling*, Abraham may well be remembered as the father of faith, yet the ethical expression of the *Akeida* is that Abraham set out to "murder" Isaac (Kierkegaard 1983: 30). What makes Abraham great therefore cannot be his moral stature, rather his fidelity to God's word, i.e. his ability suspend ethical mores, maintaining instead a passionate commitment to God. Reading the *Akeidah* in this way Kierkegaard was able to bring into question one of the guiding assumptions of enlightenment rationality as it stands in relation to religion: the

ethical is universal – be it Kant's claims to a universally binding form of moral rationality (i.e. the categorical imperative) or Hegel's *Sittlichkeit* - a collectivist and organic ethical life. Rather, the paradox of Christian faith is that it elevates the single individual or exception over and above the universal.

Kierkegaard's position accords with his more fundamental distinction between the objective and the subjective approaches to Christianity. Where the former abstracts from a given experience of Christianity to concern itself with the 'what' of Christianity (e.g. pertaining to doctrine), the latter focuses on the 'how' of Christianity; e.g. the quality of relation in which the individual stands before God:

If I am able to apprehend God objectively, I do not have faith; but because I cannot do this, I must have faith. If I want to keep myself in faith, I must continually see to it that I hold fast the objective uncertainty, see to it that in the objective uncertainty I am 'out on 70,000 fathoms of water' and still have faith. (Kierkegaard 1992: 204)

As the above suggests, for Kierkegaard the establishment of the Christian disposition requires a certain risk, what he calls the "leap into faith" (115), a necessary leap because God is utterly transcendent, *wholly Other*. God is not something to be immanently recalled from within as if the truth were something to merely discern, one's relation to God is to be *repeated*, something to be labored at: *Christianity is an existence communication*. How then do Žižek, Milbank, and Rose respectively employ Kierkegaard with a view their own projects? To be sure, what is at stake here is not the correctness of their interpretation, rather, the way in which they enlist Kierkegaard in support of their own separate theses.

IV Žižek and the suspension of the symbolic

Žižek's appropriation of Kierkegaard may be described as a militant political reading in which the internal drama of faith is transposed à la Badiou into the field of politics. Politics on this account is not a matter of administration or different emphasis within existing policy and so on (what might be broadly termed the objective approach), rather it demands a condition of passionate commitment in which one is prepared to risk everything and transgress ('suspend') the law for the sake of the unknown (the subjective approach). This is what Žižek calls the politics of the *act* (Žižek 1999: 264). Hence, as Žižek says, "there is no ethical act proper without taking the risk of such a momentary 'suspension of the big Other,' of the socio-symbolic network that guarantees the subject's identity" (263-264); i.e. a "self-destructive act [which] could clear the terrain for a new beginning" (Žižek 2000: 151). And so recalling Kierkegaard's critique of Hegel, Žižek says, "in the last resort there is no theory, just a fundamental practico-ethical decision about what kind of life one wants to commit oneself to" (Žižek 2006: 75).

On this account, Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac – the teleological suspension of the ethical – amounts to first: a willingness to call into question one's symbolic identity through an

act of fidelity to a given cause; second, a willingness to call into question the very notion of cause. This is what Žižek calls Kierkegaard's "hidden, materialist content":

This renunciation bears witness to the total gap that separates man from God: the only way to assert one's commitment to the unconditional 'Meaning of Life' is to relate *all* of life, our entire existence, to the absolute transcendence of the divine, and since there is no common measure between our life and the divine, sacrificial renunciation cannot be part of an exchange with God – we sacrifice all (the totality of our life) *for nothing*. (80)

In other words, in making ready the sacrifice for God, his sacrifice is not the heroic sacrifice of the one for the many, the kind of sacrifice one makes for a universal cause (i.e. in which the universal is higher than the individual), or the founding sacrifice of the *polis*; rather it is a sacrifice of the very cause, a kind of self-striking which undoes the very meaning of sacrifice. Abraham is not so much giving up his son for the sake of the nation, as giving up the possibility of founding a nation; i.e. *nothing*. And, to give it a Lacanian spin, because the act requires a suspension from the socio-symbolic, it is a violent act that carries with it a monstrous dimension of the sublime; a confrontation with the real of experience.

V Milbank and the suspension of the ethical

Milbank's reading of Kierkegaard centers on three principle themes: first, the uniqueness of Abraham's sacrifice. As Milbank points out, Abraham's sacrifice is not "performed within the city to ensure its survival" (Milbank 1996: 312) [Indeed, it is for this very reason that Kierkegaard contrasts Abraham at some length with Agamemnon's sacrifice of Iphigenia]. Rather, he takes Kierkegaard to be expounding, in the manner of Žižek, a kind of "anti-sacrifice"; "the absurd sacrifice of the one individual who is absolutely irreplaceable, who uniquely and without possibility of substitution (he is the lone, late, miracle child) bears the whole future city in his loins" (312). So, "instead of the mediating spatial sacrifice of the individual to the totality," Milbank takes it as "the single but 'repeated' temporal sacrifice which is the offering up of the (indeterminate) totality itself" (312). The second theme concerns the nature of reciprocity: while Abraham remains willing to sacrifice Isaac as the cause of desire à la Žižek, he does so by virtue of the absurd; i.e. in the knowledge of God's promise to Abraham – that Abraham will be father to a nation: "The offering of the whole rather than the parts is specifically represented as identical with the infinite non-sacrificial preservation and *return* of the individual and the fulfilment of all the individual's positive desires" (312). In other words, he does so in the knowledge of a return that outstrips the offering of one for many; the sacrifice is undertaken by a "self-cancelling will to sacrifice, since [it is] undertaken in the conviction that the moment of sacrifice will never arrive, or else will prove to be always already passed" (312). In short, Milbank underscores the reciprocity of sacrifice as opposed to the notion of a pure gift. This accords with Milbank's theological metaphysics and doctrine of participation: "Creatures are given to be in order to return to God, in order to return to God through gratitude"

(Milbank 2009: 201).

The third emphasis concerns the sacrifice's faithful refusal of death ratified by the subsequent ban on murder. Read against a background of human sacrifice, the substitution of Isaac puts an end to human sacrifice. The emphasis Milbank accords to this third point (notably lacking in Kierkegaard) follows an uncompromising train within his thought regarding the potential of the Christian polity to make for peaceable social difference. To put a Hegelian spin on Milbank's argument (this is Milbank *for* Hegel in the sense of Gillian Rose): by thinking the Absolute as peaceable difference, Christianity is able to represent peaceable difference within its polity, hence theology *is* social theory. In *Theology and Social Theory* this is played out between two opposing foundational mythos: pagan and Christian (dialectic/paradox). Pagan mythos assumes belief in a prior chaos which must be tamed through identification with the *Logos* of Greek thought (equality before the law). By contrast, Christian mythos assumes creation *ex nihilo*, the outpouring of beauty from nothing. And because the pagan mythos assumes prior violence, it cannot but become enshrined in the social, thereby serving as the ontological foundation of natural law (hence liberal peace is best described by Milbank as "suspended warfare") [Milbank 1996: 331].

To this reading one should add also Milbank's genealogical account of "Sublimity: the modern transcendent" (Milbank, 1998). For Žižek, Abraham's sacrifice invites a moment of sublimity to the extent it is the very symbolic supports of identity which are suspended, thereby highlighting the void around which subjectivity coalesces. Yet as Milbank argues, advancing Kierkegaard's critique of the sublime: the sublime is an "'aesthetic accounting' for transcendence" (Kierkegaard, 1938: 346). In other words, current philosophical usage of this term betrays its transcendental foundations, so where once philosophers spoke of transcendence, they now speak of sublimity. And crucially, from a genealogical perspective, this coincides with the liberal reduction of religion to the realm of private ineffability, so that "all that remains of transcendence is unknowable" (Milbank, 1998: 259): Žižek, from Milbank's perspective is, in Rose's terms, unable to think the Absolute: Žižek makes God unknowable and hence the representation of freedom in the social unknowable.

What gets left behind in this transposition is the beautiful because, as Milbank points out, "the sublime God was *also* beautiful" (259). Hegel may have tried to reconcile sublimity and beauty yet arguably he merely radicalizes Kantian sublimity: the sublime is only real in its self-negation, hence for Hegel eating the eucharistic elements signals a "sacrificial *canceling* of their materialism, and not, for the Catholic tradition, the paradoxical transformation of us *into* the divine body" (275) – a case of dialectics versus paradox. So while Milbank concurs with Žižek that Hegel's philosophy is a more exclusive "'sublimatics' as opposed to 'aesthetics' when compared with that of Kant," (276) Žižek nonetheless takes the Absolute to be "the supreme void present only when a-voided in difference, and re-voided only in re-differation, in ceaseless oscillation" (276). Žižek is therefore unable to see beauty as the "arrival of surprising harmony" (277). Little wonder also then that Žižek readily associates the real with the monstrous sublime or the stain of existence.

Because the sublime is now associated with the void, Žižek's political act can only be construed as a "hystericised interruption into the political sphere" (266). And because Žižek's thought sunders the sublime from participated beauty, he can but only privilege absolute self-sacrifice without return which becomes a source anxiety rather than erotic delight. By contrast, as Milbank says:

The reintegration of the beautiful leads desire back to an Other only partially disclosed in finite others, to a distance disclosed but always also withheld, but a distance which we trust – have 'faith' in – as an always even greater depth of harmony, and do not rationally construe simply as a shuddering abyss, since this is to render the unknowability of the unknown its ontological essence. (279)

The thrust of all this is to pose the question: is the postmodern sublime "an authentic critical gesture" or an arbitrary gesture, which "renders the subject unnecessarily empty and unmediated by objectivity" (259)? Likewise, one might view his rhetorical strategy in *Monstrosity* along the same lines. His point is not so much to engage Žižek as ask: is Žižek's reading of the *Akeida* an authentic critical gesture?

VI Rose, suspension and middle

For Rose, Kierkegaard is a thinker of the 'broken middle,' the emphasis in her reading (in a manner akin to Derrida) falls on the movement of faith: to 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 stake 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. (148-149)

Žižek emphasizes the act of necessary and wilful violence that accompanies the suspension of the big Other, which in turn exposes the real of existence; Milbank takes the suspension as the refusal of violence and death – the re-establishment of an imaginary whole; Rose takes violence as a necessary fact of the given situation (i.e. the relation of religion to the state); a feature of law (i.e. the symbolic) within which we struggle to the command of love; thereby rendering the brokenness of our institutions, because "*To posit that the ethical is suspended is to acknowledge that it is always already presupposed*. It grants a momentary license to hold the ethical fixed and unchanging" (Rose 1992: 148).

VII Paradox or dialectics?

How then do we situate Milbank and Žižek in relation to Rose? The former seeks freedom in staging the beginning of law through violent transgression; the later seeks freedom from the institution of the secular towards a Catholic humanistic 'utopia' (Milbank 2009: 126). Both evade the broken middle. For Žižek,

Kierkegaard was right: the ultimate choice is the one between the Socratic recollection and the Christian repetition. Christianity enjoins us to REPEAT the founding gesture of the primordial choice. [...] What the Christian notion of the suspension of the Law aims at is precisely this gap between the domain of moral norms and Faith, the unconditioned engagement. [...] And what is the Christian notion of being 'reborn in faith' if not the first full-fledge formulation of such an unconditional subjective engagement on account of which we are ready to suspend the very ethical substance of our being? (Žižek 2001a: 148-151).

The very suspension of law becomes the beginning of law. Yet as Žižek is fully aware, the distinctive mark of repetition is *revelation*: something new, not merely internally recollected, and so it follows that without the content of biblical revelation, without being able to think the Absolute, Žižek risks being confined to the private realm marked out by liberalism. Indeed, does he not fall prey to Hegel's critique of Kant? Žižek offers form without content? What matters for Žižek is the imperative of faith, the 'unconditional subjective engagement', a politics of the surd which demands a sacrifice albeit not *for* a cause (sacrifice of the one for the many), but the sacrifice *of* the cause (sacrifice the many for the one). It is this mode of sacrifice which will determine law, not its particular content; it can be applied to anything and therefore creates an arbitrary law. Hence while Žižek readily adopts the Christian event as the paradigmatic model of transgressive sacrifice (Christ did not die for the sake of the many; Christ's death was the death of God, the God of the beyond); he as readily pushes the desire for transgression to its conclusion calling for – "the highest example of Hegelian *Aufhebung* [...] the gesture of abandoning its [Christianity's] institutional organization" (Žižek 2003: 171). The snake eats its tail; Christian transgression demands foremost the sacrifice not *for* the Church, but *of* the Church. And so the dialectic: Christianity becomes atheism from which the new law arises. In this way the destruction of church merely consigns religion to the private and interior castle, yet "Philosophy has no social import if the absolute cannot be thought" (Rose 1981: 204)?

Milbank by contrast argues for a different polity:

more pluralist, more corporatist, more distributist, more lay religious potential which refuses the modern duality of the economic and the political as much as the modern duality of the secular and sacred, a Catholic humanism which sustains genuine transcendence only because of its commitment to incarnational paradox. (Milbank 2009: 117)

Where Žižek divests his thought of metaphysical persuasion (i.e. the desire to instantiate a transcendental signifier – Being/God – to give meaning to the whole), Milbank positively calls for its

renewal. According to Milbank, the embrace of the postmodern critique, and collapse of positivist ideologies has left a vacuum into which steps fideistic religion:

rush[ing] in to fill the cognitive void, because societies cannot exist without some sort of account of what is real and desirable. The only alternatives now [...] are an entirely nihilistic mode of market society on the one hand (which will require increasingly authoritarian policing) or else a return to prominence, as the Pope advocates, of metaphysical discourses capable of mediating between faith and reason. (Milbank 2007: unpaginated)

The passage highlights Milbank's predilection for 'paternalism', "something relatively good, in comparison with the egalitarian ruthlessness of individualism" (Milbank 2009: 127). Hence Žižek is entirely correct in pointing out that in contrast to the usual notion of democratic appearances sustained by an implicit and "deeper" hierarchical order, Milbank presents us with a "hierarchic phenomenal order sustained by a 'deeper' equality with regard to the unknowable Origin" (Žižek 2009b: 251). Yet the real problem may be not that Milbank betrays the radical core of democratic action for the "soft-facism" (251) of ecclesial utopia; rather, the Rosean question: "how could 'peace' bequeathed as 'harmonious' arise, without acknowledging the *polis* intruding into vague sociality"? (Rose 1992: 284). Does not Milbank disavow violence?

In both cases, we have an instance of political theology; either the gesture of a violent transgression which cannot be accounted for by the conditions it gives rise to, or liberation from social and political *dominium* in some "expectant city". We are, as it were, slung between "ecstasy and eschatology, the promise of touching our ownmost singularity" - the real of our existence, and the holy city (Rose 1992: 285). And because freedom is not concretely represented, it takes the shape of holiness. To employ the words of Rose: "we have here middles *mended* as 'holiness' – without the examination of the broken middle which would show how these holy nomads arise of and reinforce the unfreedom they prefer not to know" (Rose 1992: 284). Indeed, Milbank's oblique criticisms of Rose in *Monstrosity* appear to reinforce her very judgement:

In saying that Hegel is not a gymnast of certainty and identity that the postmoderns have taken him to be, one is inevitably left with a somewhat 'post-modern' Hegel who leaves us with sheer contingencies, never-to-be-resolved aporias, middles forever 'broken' in time, hopeless failures in love heroically persisted in, and so forth." (Milbank 2009: 117)

In other words, is it not precisely "middles forever 'broken' in time" that Milbank prefers not to know?

VII Conclusion

Returning to Rose – Milbank and Žižek’s silent partner – I have suggested that the difference between dialectics or paradox; monstrosity or beauty, turns on two different evasions of a third: Law. Where Žižek’s works concern the instigation of desire in the register of the real, Milbank’s concerns the satiation of desire in the register of the imaginary. The choice presents it itself as heresy versus orthodoxy, yet as Lacan was keen to point out, heresy is precisely *IRS* – pronounced *hérésie*; i.e. the real, imaginary, symbolic – the determining solidarity of which the loss of any one of those three would render the two others “mad” (Lacan 1973-74: 13/11/73); two aversions to the Law: transgressive joy or a peace beyond legality in a heavenly city. And in their inability to think the Absolute, they reproduce the lack of freedom in the social. Rose’s voice (not withstanding her criticism of Lacan in *The Broken Middle*) sounds out to preserve the trinity in its brokenness.

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