

N.B., This paper is an excerpt from my forthcoming book, *Persuasions of God: Inventing the Rhetoric of René Girard*, forthcoming from Penn State University Press, 2024.

Rhetoric continues to suffer a reputation for being nothing more than “a hired gun,” a persuasive art that can be used for good or ill, but is mostly used for convenience, for expediency, for purely self-interested ends.¹ Though Girard did not speak much of rhetoric, he seems to have shared this conventional Platonic distrust of the persuasive arts. For Girard, rhetoric is “legerdemain,”² “hackneyed,”³ “flamboyance,”⁴ and “a glimmering veil...over the sordid realities of life.”⁵ Given the orientation of Girard’s project, which sought to uncover things covered, it is not surprising that he would construe rhetoric as mere puffery.

But it would be unwise for students of mimetic theory to imitate Girard’s disdain for persuasion. By ignoring rhetoric, mimetic theory cuts itself off from a set of practices and resources necessary for resisting the pull of acquisitive mimesis and responding to the call of loving mimesis. I have made this case in two previous articles, both of which argued that mimetic theory needs to engage with rhetorical theory both so that it may enrich its own anthropology and invent the persuasive means of pacific mimesis.⁶ In this paper, I continue to make this case by arguing for a *rhetoric of meekness*, which I offer as the best available means of a Girardian style of confrontation. I will define a rhetoric of meekness as a rhetoric of non-rivalrous response, a rhetoric of

¹ Wess, *Kenneth Burke*, 27.

² Girard, *Mimesis and Theory*, 287.

³ Girard, *Theater*, 127.

⁴ Girard, *Theater*, 349.

⁵ Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, 1.

⁶ See Lynch, “Recovering” and “Rescuing.”

compassionate agonism that refuses both a self-diminishing submission to an opponent's antagonism or a mimetic mirroring of it.

But why a “style of confrontation” Why “confrontation” at all? First, because the ideal Girardian form of living—captured for Christians in the phrase *imitatio Christi*—is hardly a means of avoiding conflict. While Girard's singular insight into mimesis offers the most persuasive warning *against* conflict (at least when it is born of the model-obstacle double-bind), his idea of loving or pacific mimesis invites a different sort of conflict. The most loving, self-effacing imitators of saintly models will face conflict—are more likely to face conflict—because they will scandalize those who still compete in games of rivalry. Even the refusal to engage in confrontation is a form of confrontation.

If this is true, then it becomes necessary to imagine a Girardian style of conflict, an approach to confrontation that neither evades conflict nor exacerbates it. Meekness promises a style of confrontation appropriate for the confrontation occasioned by loving or pacific mimesis. Meekness is not mere mildness or submissiveness. It is instead a profound power to respond to a situation without rivalry—that is, without mirroring the competitive, hostile, or even malevolent instincts of others. Neither is meekness powerlessness; its power is neither power *over*, nor power *against*. Rather, it is the power to refuse—where appropriate—to be (de)formed by the collective feeling that has formed an emerging situation. Girard calls this collective feeling “mimetic rivalry,” the way in which mimetic desire can lead actors to mirror the feelings and actions of others, including one's purported opponents. A rhetoric of meekness does not seek to avoid confrontation altogether, but rather to confront in terms different than those that have been presented by one's opponents. Meekness also presents a style appropriate for a post-Christian religious rhetoric, a rhetoric that is appropriate for what David Dawson calls Girard's “Christian witness against Christendom”⁷ and “*the most*

⁷ Dawson, *Flesh*, 134/200.

formidable theory of the death of religion ever ventured.”⁸ Girard considers the Gospels the texts *par excellence* for decoding the problems of human culture, but that decoding also mounts a searing critique of those Christian ideas that may still complicit with the violent sacred. Girard’s self-implicating understanding of Christianity challenges conventional understandings of ideas of the sacred and sacrifice, thus occasioning a “rhetorical demand” for inventing Christian religious rhetoric in an “alienated,” or post-Christian key.⁹

The field of rhetorical studies is not likely to meet this demand in conventional ways—better message, better appeals, better arguments, and so on. In fact, recent rhetorical theory critiques the notion that rhetoric is an art to be possessed and exploited for ends determined by the rhetor. Recent developments in rhetorical theory have challenged *rhetoric-as-art* and offered instead *rhetoric-as-ontology*—that is, rhetoric as a condition of human relations, both to the other and to the non-human. A growing number of scholars have argued that we should see rhetoric not as something unproblematically available for our use, but rather as a kind of constitutive openness to the other. A rhetoric of meekness draws from these thinkers by imagining an orientation to rhetoric that recognizes constitutive vulnerability but also preserves a practice of response within that vulnerability. If ontological notions of rhetoric rightly challenge our confidence in simplistic notions of purpose (along with intention, means, and ends), a rhetoric of meekness articulates a form of response that accounts for that challenge.

To begin outlining a rhetoric of meekness, I begin with Eric Charles White’s notion of *kaironomia*, a neologism that suggests the pull between *nomos* (tradition, custom, culture) and *kairos* (timeliness, surprise, novelty). For rhetoricians, *kairos* names the occasion and the art by which

⁸ Dawson, *Flesh*, ebook, 134/200.

⁹ I borrow the idea of a “rhetorical demand” from Ronald Arnett’s *Levinas’ Rhetorical Demand*, which similarly argues that Levinas, though uninterested and even hostile to rhetoric, produces insight that creates a need for rhetorical intervention (1-3,7-13). See also David Frank’s “Origins,” which extends Arnett’s argument through Jewish rhetorical traditions.

rhetoricians find opportune moments for intervention. “As a prescription concerning the basis on which thought can *begin* to intervene in the world, *kairos* is offered with the understanding . . . that thought must always be willing, as circumstances change, to begin *again*.”¹⁰ The problem, as White describes it, lies in the inherent contradiction of imagining an art or practice that can somehow anticipate or attempt surprise. “Since *kairos* stands for precisely the irrational novelty of the moment that escapes formalization, any science of ‘kaironomy’ would find itself incoherently promising foreknowledge of chance.”¹¹ If one has some foreknowledge of *kairos*, then it would no longer seem to be kairoic, since the foreknowledge would allow rhetors to prepare their response in advance. To anticipate a moment as “opportune” is paradoxically to render it ordinary. For White, the idea of *doxa*, or received opinion, represents the ordinary, or at least the familiar and conventional (e.g., rhetoric is a hired gun). The question of *kairos* then becomes, “how can one communicate the ‘unheard of’ in such a way that it is understandable but not immediately assimilable to the *doxa*?”¹² If an idea is entirely novel, then how can it even be heard? But if it can be heard, how can it ever be novel?

This conundrum means that rhetoric must forever operate within a tension between the novel and the hearable. “The desire that thought should continually innovate, so that rather than simply repeating, it would always posit alternatives to tradition, is accompanied by the recognition that thinking must become *complicit with tradition* if it would communicate with an audience.”¹³ The idea of “complicity” may once again imply that rhetoric is ethically suspect. But complicity in White’s sense suggests that the timeliness of *kairos* requires a relation to *chronos* even to be recognized as “timely.” Unless *chronos* is there to provide a contrast to *kairos*, there can be no *kairos*.

¹⁰ White, *Kaironomia*, 17.

¹¹ White, *Kaironomia*, 20.

¹² White, *Kaironomia*, 39.

¹³ White, *Kaironomia*, 41, emphasis added.

This is what White means by “complicity,” which entails being folded into the familiar in order to introduce the unfamiliar. This double-bind also mirrors the way in which White understands the position of rhetors themselves, who must enter situations deeply enough to themselves be affected (and even effected) by the situation. But this openness to being affected/effected is precisely what makes it possible for the rhetor to be effective/affective. “The seducer who is seduced by the occasion of seduction can be taken as the emblem for an ideal dynamic between a principle of intentionality (or the self that would repeat itself in the world) and a principle of spontaneity (or the unforeseen opportunity of the immediate occasion).”¹⁴ To seduce is first to be opened to being seduced; the contingency of situation (in)forms the contingency of the rhetor’s subjectivity.

The idea of a “seduced seducer,” moreover, reminds us not just that rhetoric cannot be reduced to technique, but also that persuasion always draws in the persuader as much as the audience. Michelle Ballif captures this idea succinctly, describing the conventional understanding of rhetorical agency as one built on “a presumption that ‘we’ exist independently of ‘rhetoric,’ and that rhetoric is perhaps a tool that ‘we’ use to do a variety of work—work of our choosing—and work that advantageously benefits us.”¹⁵ Ballif argues that this common understanding of rhetoric begs several questions about agency, intention, and purpose. But the largest begged question is the question of persuasion itself. Implied in Ballif’s remark is the third idea of persuasion outlined in the introduction: persuasion as a tendency, orientation, or character suggested by the idea of dwelling rather than essence or assertion. This usage of persuasion does not simply reverse the order of agent and effect; it rearranges them into a more reciprocal relation. Agency, whatever it may be, is as much an effect of persuasion as a driver of it.

Related to the idea of complicity is the idea of *capacity*, which suggests a paradoxical relation

¹⁴ White, *Kaironomia*, 38-39.

¹⁵ Ballif, “Divining,” 159.

between control and vulnerability. We do not “have” a capacity for receiving and giving; we *are* a capacity, as much possessed as possessing. Nathan Stormer and Bridie McGreavy suggest that capacity allows for a more profound understanding of rhetoric’s ontological and ecological character than the more familiar notion of “agency.” If *agency* (L. *agens*, acting) connotes the exertion of power, *capacity* connotes a relation between power and a kind of powerlessness. The Latin verb *capere* (to take in or capture) is related to the adjective *capax* (large, spacious, roomy). This etymology suggests the paradoxical power of emptiness, in which power is enabled by making room for something. This idea offers an entirely new understanding of the familiar phrase “empty rhetoric,” which usually designates disingenuousness or deceit, a gap between claim and action. Understood as an alternative to simplistic conceptions of agency, however, empty rhetoric indicates the ability to make oneself open, available, and even hospitable to the influence of others. Empty rhetoric seeks to make a space, to move over, to make room. “By shifting the focus from agency to capacity, we revise the commonplace for discussing qualities that empower rhetoricity, emphasizing the ecology of entanglements between entities over the abilities that are inherent to humans.”¹⁶ For Stormer and McGreavy, the central issue is to account for the full complexity of rhetoric’s ecology, in which rhetorical capacity is not a human possession over and against materiality, but rather an extension of it. Within this ecology, the rules of the game shift. Stormer and McGreavy argue that the “most general relational quality is struggle; rhetoric emerges from and for struggle. However, ecological struggle is striving pursued *with*, not contesting *against*, other things. It is struggle in dependence, not between ‘independents.’”¹⁷ It is a struggle of complicity.

Scholars and practitioners of Buddhism will be immediately alert to the Buddhist resonances with this idea of empty rhetoric. But there are also Christian resonances, particularly in the Christian

¹⁶ Stormer and McGreavy, “Thinking Ecologically,” 5.

¹⁷ Stormer and McGreavy, “Thinking Ecologically,” 3.

idea of *kenosis*, or divine self-emptying. *Kenosis* appears in Paul's Letter to the Philippians: "Rather, [Jesus] emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, coming in human likeness; and found human in appearance, he humbled himself, becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross" (Phil. 2: 7-8). *Kenosis* suggests the Christian theological idea that the Son exercises the capacity for emptiness, divesting himself of divine power in exchange for a radical sense of intimacy in the Incarnation.¹⁸ This entrance includes a fundamental sense of vulnerability (L. *vulnus*, wound), up to and including death by violence. In addition, this divine capaciousness is what makes possible the theopoeisis, the "god-making" of "deification." The paradoxical path to theopoeisis thus lies in what we might call an "anthropo-kenosis," a human self-emptying: "For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it" (Mt 16:25). These capacities are understood to be thoroughly rhetorical insofar as they both emanate from a prior rhetoricity and indicate some sense of intentionality. One *surrenders*, to contingency, to incarnation, to the other or the Wholly Other.

A Rhetoric of Meekness

As I begin presenting a rhetoric of meekness, I want to begin with what I take to be a current expression of its ethos before turning to its historical origins in rhetorical theory. What I'm trying to capture here is suggested by the notion of "directed inaction" as Daniel Gross describes it in *Being-Moved*. Gross links the idea to Stoicism, Gandhi's *satyagraha*, and the act of conscientious objection—all of which can be understood as "inactions" that are directed to social or political ends that involve a certain level of confrontation.¹⁹ Gross notes that the conscientious objector's refusal

¹⁸ The *Westminster Theological Dictionary* defines *kenosis* as a "theological term for the 'self-emptying' of Jesus Christ in which he took the form of a slave or servant [. . .] to accomplish the work of salvation through his death and resurrection" (153). Theologically, that does not mean that Christ loses his divine nature, but rather that he makes himself vulnerable in taking on a human nature. In classical Greek usage, *kenosis* has a negative connotation, referring to defect or lack. This is how Plato seems to use it (see *Republic* 585b and *Philebus* 35b). It can also refer to medical evacuation, such as purging or vomiting, or a deficient or restricted diet. Paul tends to use the term in a similar way (Rom 4:14, 1 Cor 1:17, 1 Cor 9:15). The hymn of Philippians is unique in this regard.

¹⁹ Gross, *Being-Moved*, 137.

to “act” constitutes decisive action; it is a clear and definite “no.” But it is also a paradoxically passive action, not just in the objector’s refusal to be caught up in the march to war, but also in the objector’s positioning himself to be imprisoned for the refusal. In a sense, the objector turns himself over to the very powers to which he objects, witnessing against the system from within it.

It is this extreme openness that constitutes for Gross a kind of rhetorical listening. Rhetorical listening signifies “a stance of openness that a person may choose to assume” in order to “negotiate troubled identifications” and “facilitate cross-cultural communication,” particularly around issues of gender and race.²⁰ At its most basic, a rhetoric of listening proceeds first by listening to the other before trying to persuade the other. Gross takes this idea further and imagines a rhetoric of listening that avoids assuming a distinction between active and passive.²¹ Seeing a model for this kind of listening in sacred rhetoric, Gross likens his suggested approach to that of Mary, who responds to the angel Gabriel by saying, “May it be done to me according to your word” (Lk. 1.38). Paradoxically, Mary exercises a passivity; like the conscientious objector, she gives herself over to the call she has heard. She clearly makes a decision—the presence of her assent in the text suggests that she could have said no—but it is a decision that results in an even greater vulnerability, as becomes clear when Simeon, alluding to the grief she will one day experience, tells her, “and you yourself a sword will pierce” (Lk. 2.35). Yet that vulnerability is not simply passive, as indicated by the prayer Mary shares with her cousin Elizabeth, a prayer known popularly as “The Magnificat.” “[The Mighty One] has shown might with his arm,/dispersed the arrogant of mind and heart./He has thrown down the rulers from their thrones/but lifted up the lowly./The hungry he has filled with good things;/the rich he has sent away empty” (Lk 1.51-53). If this is inaction, it is very much directed.

²⁰ Ratcliffe, *Rhetorical Listening*, 17.

²¹ Gross, *Being-Moved*, 132.

This productive tension between the active and passive indicates the tension through a rhetoric of meekness may be invented. To be sure, “meekness” is a risky term. In many situations, we might welcome attitudes of “humility” and “mildness,” especially when religious assertions are being made. In other contexts, however, many might be understandably wary of ideas of “submissiveness” or “tameness,” and especially alarmed by the ways in which meekness has so often been gendered. An obsolete meaning of meekness assigns it to a social superior, as in, “merciful, compassionate, indulgent.” But the term is more readily associated with social inferiors, as in, “inclined to submit tamely to oppression or injury, easily imposed upon or cowed, timid, biddable” (OED). These connotations do not make meekness more persuasive. The obsolete meaning implies an unacceptable level of social stratification, the latter, more familiar definition implies an equally unacceptable level of social submissiveness. This is all before we get to the term’s use in scripture, the most famous instance of which is Jesus’s claim that the meek shall inherit the earth (Mt. 5:5). The endorsement of meekness (Gk. *praûs*, *praeia*, *praûn*)²² has often been taken as a soothing promise to the poor: suffer now, and you won’t later. Construed as a term of political theology, meekness seems to anesthetize the aspirations of the *anawim*.

Yet the context of Jesus’s announcement suggests something far more assertive than is often

²² In the Christian scriptures, meekness (*Praûs*, *praeia*, *praûn*) is distinguished from weakness (*âsthéneia*). “Meek” according to Danker and Krug’s *Concise Greek-English Lexicon*, refers to having a temperate attitude, to being gentle or patient (296), as in “Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am meek and humble of heart; and you will find rest for yourselves” (Mt 11.29), or “Say to daughter Zion, /Behold, your king comes to you, /meek and riding on an ass, /and on a colt, the foal of a beast of burden” (Mt 21:5, cf. Is. 62.11, Zech 9.9), and of course, “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the land” (Mt. 5.5). Danker and Krug explicitly contrast meekness to weakness (*âsthéneia*), which is a negation of the root *sthénos*, or strength (57-58). The antonym they offer is *dúnamis*, the word Aristotle employs for “power” in the *Rhetoric*. There are understandable reasons to be wary of the idea of meekness, which in Classical Greek was used to refer to the taming of animals, according to Liddell, Scott, and Jones. In *On the Art of Horsemanship*, Xenophon uses *πρᾶος* to describe the “gentle aids” that one should use when training a horse. The term *πρᾶος* was also used to describe people, but often with context of unequal power relations. Plato uses the term in *The Republic* to mean “gentle” (in opposition to *χαλεπός*, or “harsh”) to refer to the guardians of the Republic, who must be both gentle and harsh (Rep 375). Writing in late 1st century CE Koine Greek, Flavius Josephus uses the term in *Jewish Antiquities* in reference to Herod giving a lighter punishment than expected to those who tried to overthrow him near the end of his life (*Antiquities* 17.6.4). In this light, the radicalness of Jesus’s statement that meek shall inherit the land becomes all the more clear.

understood. When Jesus assures his audience that the meek shall inherit the earth, he invokes Psalm 37, which claims that “the lowly shall possess the land” (Ps 37.11), an echo of God’s promise to Abraham. Jesus’s announcement is thus a statement not only of how things may be someday, but of how things ought to be now.²³ In Jesus’s thinking, meekness is actually much closer to the notions of directed inaction or satyagraha discussed by Gross. Theologian Walter Wink confirms this connection. Wink explains that Jesus’s famous injunctions—to turn the other cheek, to give your cloak when your coat has been demanded, to go the extra mile when only one has been imposed—are species of resistance rather than acquiescence. We mistake these injunctions for masochism, Wink argues, when we forget to pay attention to Jesus’s rhetorical situation, particularly his audience. “Jesus’s listeners are not those who strike, initiate lawsuits, or impose forced labor, but their victims.” His audiences include those who are “forced to stifle outrage at their dehumanizing treatment by the hierarchical system of class, race, gender, age, and status, and as a result of imperial occupation.”²⁴ For these listeners, to be struck on the right cheek was to be humiliated by a social superior, the kind of person who would strike with the left hand (used for unclean tasks) or the back of the right hand, which would also add insult to injury. In this context, turning the cheek would not be an act of deference, but of defiance. Similarly, in a culture in which nakedness was a greater shame for the viewer than the viewed, to offer one’s last stitch of clothing was to ask, “you want this, too?” The same was true for carrying the pack the extra mile. Because Roman soldiers could legally order someone to carry their pack for one mile and one mile only, offering to carry it for a second would focus attention on the initial injustice: if you want to take advantage of me, then let’s

²³ Elsewhere, invocations of meekness seem to recall the older sense of a social superior foregoing their status and power, as in Jesus’s invocation of Sirach (51:23-26): “Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am meek and humble of heart; and you will find rest for yourselves” (Mt 11: 29), and the evangelist’s invocation of the prophet Zechariah: “Say to daughter Zion, /Behold, your king comes to you, /meek and riding on an ass, /and on a colt, the foal of a beast of burden” (Mt. 21:5).

²⁴ Wink, *Engaging*, 176.

really do it. Such an offer, Wink insists, would be “no way to *avoid* conflict!”²⁵

Judith Butler observes a contemporary version of this ironic rhetoric in the “standing man” protest that took place in Taksim Square in Turkey in 2013. In response to a government edict banning public assembly, performance artist Erdem Gündüz arranged a protest in which individuals stood silently at the mandated distance from one another. Technically they did not violate the terms of the edict. “What they did,” writes Butler, “was to perform compliance perfectly.”²⁶ Their form of protest managed both to demonstrate and demonstrate against the ban. “The performance thus both submitted to and defied the interdiction, in and through the same action. It shows the knotted position of the subjugated subject by at once exposing and opposing its own subjugation.”²⁷ In this case, the protest at once mirrors and refuses to mirror the government’s action. By mirroring the edict exactly, the protesters hold up a mirror to the government, but without imitating the government’s repression.

Most importantly for arguments I am developing, meekness imagines the possibility of confrontation without rivalry—without, that is, the imitation of the opponent. Meekness confronts, but not by mirroring. The Italian philosopher Norberto Bobbio insists that Meekness is not the same thing as mildness, passivity, or what we might call “undirected inaction.” Meek persons do not avoid action. Rather, they “refrain from exercising the spirit of contest, competition, or rivalry, and therefore also of winning.”²⁸ Meekness is not against winning *per se*—winning new rights, liberties, and so on. But it avoids defining winning exclusively in terms of the opponent’s defeat. To anticipate the arguments we will pursue in Chapter Two, Girard’s basic argument is that rivalry is a product of mimetic desire: we converge on the same objects and find ourselves in competition.

²⁵ Wink, *Engaging*, 176.

²⁶ Butler, *Force*, 195-96.

²⁷ Butler, *Force*, 196.

²⁸ Bobbio, “In Praise,” 29.

Those in some kind of contest are thus prone to mirror each other, to return like for like. Think of the old *Spy vs. Spy* comic from *Mad* magazine: two spies trying to outdo each other. One is white, the other black, but they are otherwise identical, which means that both their bodies and their actions are perfect mirrors of their enemies. Visually, each requires the other as background in order for their own actions to be visible. Bobbio's comment, read through Girard, indicates that the meek person *does not imitate or mirror the desires of the opponent*. This is a crucial distinction. The meek person may certainly occasion confrontation, but not rivalry, because the meek person is refusing to play the game as it has been designed. The refusal that constitutes meekness is deeply rhetorical in the sense of rhetorical realism outlined by Wess. Rhetorical realism "does not theorize in advance where to expect the lines in the sand to be drawn," but rather "prepares us to be ready for anything."²⁹ When the meek person is playing, we may not know what the game is.

²⁹ Wess, *Kenneth Burke*, 38.

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