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'Keep your mind in hell and despair not'

14 April 1995

Gillian Rose

Elaine Williams talks to Gillian Rose, the philosopher who has fused her scholarship, love affairs and experience of ovarian cancer into an extraordinary bestselling book.

It takes an extraordinary person to send their cancer consultant away clutching a copy of Plato's Symposium to his bosom. "How," said Gillian Rose to her consultant, "are you going to sell chemotherapy to somebody whose perspective on life is totally erotic?"

Should the poor man have suffered the misapprehension that he was being propositioned, the Symposium was placed in his hand to initiate him into the nature of intellectual eros, the eroticism of one who is infinitely curious regarding whatever one is faced with; the Lover of truth, beauty, wisdom.

Gillian Rose, professor of social and political thought in the department of sociology at Warwick University, was called to philosophy at the age of 17. She has lived her life by it for more than 25 years and now lives through it with ovarian cancer. Indeed, although she is well, the contemplation of death has endowed her with renewed vigour. For if she has, hitherto, been a respected, weighty, but lone voice among a specialised readership, she has, since her illness, been driven to write philosophy which has created ripples of excitement among a wider critical audience.

After the catharsis of a second operation, which confirmed the spread of cancer and which failed to reverse a colostomy, and after the subsequent departure of a lover and the feeling she would thus be destroyed, Gillian Rose sat down to write Love's Work. "How can you survive a potentially fatal illness and lose the person you are closest to, how can you?" This is an autobiographical narrative of astonishing power which intertwines threads of philosophy and personal life.

Love's Work ranges through friendships, family relationships, love affairs and cancer, taking us on a journey to the cities of New York, Jerusalem, Auschwitz and Camelot. It is a book about revelation gained from the fluctuations of everyday existence. "Keep your mind in hell, and despair not" is the repeated call to salvation. Personal detail is veiled by philosophical discourse. It is a kind of personal prayer, mixing events with metaphysics. A failed entanglement with a Roman Catholic priest, known by the pseudonym Father Dr Patrick Gorman, for example, is described as a painful journey towards redemption.

Rose made her name in modern European philosophy. Her books, Hegel contra Sociology, Dialectic of Nihilism, The Broken Middle and Judaism and Modernity, range over philosophy, theology and social and political theory. She is critical of post-modernism with its rejection of reason, though she is equally critical of the unwillingness of analytical philosophy to consider its own practice in the context of social and political realities. Rose believes that philosophy can be both rational and of its time. In that respect she moves beyond simply being a Hegelian scholar, developing her work in an original way to engage with contemporary issues, redefining feminism, exploring the philosophy and ethics of Holocaust mythology and folklore, exposing communitarianism, looking with a philosopher's eye at architectural issues.

She has thus taken professional risks and placed herself outside the Oxbridge dominated philosophy establishment. It is no accident that she finds herself teaching philosophy in a sociology department. Sociology and philosophy, she believes, are ruined by their division of labour.

Indeed she is very critical of her own Oxford undergraduate education at St Hilda's, to which she gained an open scholarship. "I was told: 'You don't read historically, that's not the way to read philosophy, history is of no importance'. Whereas when I started reading sociological theory, history became central again to philosophical endeavour, so that I could work in a way that was historical, critical, political, holistic. All that was destroyed by the Oxford way of reading philosophy."

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She is now experiencing the pleasure of seeing her work break out of its academic confines to be consumed by a thirsty public. *Love's Work*, published earlier this year by Chatto, sold out within two weeks and went into an immediate reprint. A new book, *Mourning Becomes the Law*, a collection of essays, including one on death and anachronism, and another on fascism and representation (based on Schindler's List) is being published by Canto, Cambridge. She is negotiating a second book, the successor of *Love's Work*, for which she already has the title. *Edmee and Harikleia* is a collection of 209 prose poems, "each composed around a person's name" covering the history of philosophy and theology, a combination of philosophy and narrative. Yet another work, *Poem and Prayer*, a collection of her poetry, is also under discussion with publishers.

The world, she says, is hungry for hard-nosed philosophy: "People are fed up with all this New Age stuff". *Edmee and Harikleia* will, she says, be better than *Sophie's World*, the book by Jostein Gaarder about philosophy which has become something of a cult item among school-age students. In that book, says Rose, narrative and philosophy are separated, and the philosophy itself is actually quite dry. "As an artist I am able to blend the two together."

Gillian Rose's academic work is dense, stylish and formidable. *Love's Work* is accessible, lyrical, provocative. She would describe herself as a feminist, but in this book she exposes "reductive" feminism. About sex she writes: "Love-making isn't ever simply pleasure. Sex manuals or feminist tracts which imply the infinite plasticity of position and pleasure, which counsel assertiveness whether in bed or out, are dangerously destructive of imagination, of erotic and of spiritual ingenuity. The sexual exchange will be as complicated as the relationship in general - even more so . . .

feminism never offered me any help, for it fails to address the power of women as well as their powerlessness."

She rejects the argument that patriarchy "is always in the wrong and that assertion is what a woman needs to learn. A woman needs to learn to be a Lover and by that I mean something creative, very strong.

"I wouldn't be the extraordinary person I am if I hadn't been encouraged by men. It's men who've said to me 'be bold, original, take risks', whether my fathers, (father and step-father) my teachers, my colleagues."

In *Love's Work* she describes how, during the course of her illness she is made to realise only too painfully the limitations of the "esoteric but fatal language of clinical control" but goes on to be more damning of the "literature and liquids of alternative healing".

She told me: "What the books should be writing about, and I don't know a single one that does, is how to deal with an illness if your friends and family themselves can't deal with it."

Rose makes some breathtaking leaps in her writing across a range of radically disparate subjects. One example of this in *Love's Work* is where she jumps from Holocaust to colostomy. Both are part of her life's experience. As an intellectual Jewess she was chosen to join an advisory group serving the Polish Commission on the future of Auschwitz and has lectured on modern Judaic philosophy. As a cancer sufferer she has endured "the opening of the colon on to the abdomen".

She spares no one. She wants to explore the poetry of colostomy, she wants to invent a "colostomy ethnography". She wants to "talk about **** - the hourly transfiguration of our lovely eating of the sun". She wants to free it from "sexual fetishism" as well as from "coyness, distaste and the medical textbook".

She notes that when the Holocaust scholar Robert Jan van Pelt raises issues about the mismanagement of sanitation at the death camps, "the practicalities of excrement", he is met by "reluctance, embarrassment and loss of attention" whereas people are "inured to the discussion of the design of gas chambers". He is thus "caught in the tightening coils of Holocaust ethnography". She criticises the rigidity of stance that can make folklore out of one kind of death but shirks the implications of another.

Cities have been important in her life and are central to her philosophy. She returns to Plato's Symposium at the heart of which is the analogy between soul and city. She states "You see, modern Continental philosophers are preoccupied with the argument against metaphysics, whereas I am interested in the soul and the city and the relationship between theology and politics - all of that's disqualified if you think western metaphysics has been this patriarchal, imperial, unequivocal discourse of reason as domination.

"Post-modernism really is despairing rationalism without reason. You cannot avoid reason. You appeal to it as you are devastating it".

"What's unusual about the way I do it is that I think you can only be a serious student of post-Kantian philosophy if you understand that the relationship between Kant and Hegel is fundamental. And that means you include not just the argument about metaphysics but social

and political philosophy." Rose declares she is now living in a state of inspiration. When asked by her mother recently whether she regretted, due to her physical suffering, that she had ever been born, she replied: "On the contrary, I believe I lead a charmed life. I'm so lucky because I am having my death. Goodness, I could die in an accident."

Gillian Rose is a wordsmith using her vast vocabulary with awesome agility - a feat for someone who as a child suffered from profound dyslexia. Her desire to overcome this disability has left her with a life-long passion for language and a determination to master the most esoteric literary styles. She says: "I do think I have the greatest love affair with language. Work and life are inseparable but the connection is language - and silence - for somehow one is also expressing what cannot be spoken, what cannot be represented". In Rose's large, airy apartment, full of southern light and northern shade, a dictionary lies in every room. There is also a library of 7,000 books divided into post-Kantian Continental philosophy, theology, Judaica, poetry, literature, fine art and architecture, which she will bequeath.

As a child she read before her family stirred from its slumbers in the morning and long after parents and siblings were asleep at night. Her parents divorced when she was four years old and custody was contested endlessly through the courts: "Reading itself was a haven for me because reading was set against the divorce. When I learnt to read I found a world I could enter which would take me away from the emotional turmoil of adults. I was very close to my father . . . which you see is what made me into a Lover, because I was a very formed girl, a little individual . . . and that pattern of being very close to your father and then losing him can be very creative for a woman . . . because she's had a great love, she's been affirmed and then the loss, if she works, the loss can be very enriching."

Men indeed have played a central role in Rose's life. At Oxford her first real lover, Philip Hodson, who went on to become an editor at Forum, the magazine of pornography and with whom she cohabited for two years, introduced her to the delights of sex. In New York, as a fresh graduate at Columbia University, she was introduced to the wonders of modern European philosophy by Jim Fessenden who was teaching and finishing a PhD in the philosophy department.

Jim, an exotic and erotic New York gay, recently died of Aids, but from those early years of exploring continental philosophy he remained something of a mentor and a dear friend. Like Rose, he consumed books, music, art; he introduced her to New York culture, to drugs and to Hegel.

Some of her life with him has been described in Love's Work, thoroughly alarming Father Gorman, who telephoned Professor Rose after publication worrying that he too might have contracted Aids. "I just couldn't believe it! Because I was with Jim in the early 1970s for two years . . . This was a man I'd known in the mid-1980s and I thought 'You selfish bum! That's real decadence.' Here's a Catholic priest who drives a big car, drinks champagne and has had a lover - and yet he is lovable."

Jim was also a close friend of Camille Paglia, author of the bestseller *Sexual Personae* and described as America's premier intellectual renegade. In her latest book, *Vamps and Tramps*, Paglia dedicates a chapter to Jim Fessenden and refers to his close friend Professor Rose as "that brilliant British philosopher". Nevertheless Love's Work has hit a raw spot in its criticism that Paglia failed to develop the philosophical references "which Jim urged her to pursue".

New York was a turning point. When Rose returned to "stuffy old Oxford" as a PhD student at St Anthony's College, undertaking a thesis on the German philosopher Theodor Adorno, she had to turn to emigres for the kind of academic support she wanted. One of these was the distinguished Polish philosopher Leszek Kolakowski. "He was totally permissive. He thought Adorno was rubbish but he said 'You must care'. When I was one year into my PhD wondering if I was understanding a thing I was doing he said (she vivaciously imitates his accent): 'Don't worry I also did my PhD on a third-rate thinker.' That was his encouragement." She was able to pursue her holistic approach to philosophy during 15 creative years at the University of Sussex in the School of European Studies where she was encouraged by Julius Carlebach, the great British sociologist Tom Bottomore and the literary critic Tony Thorlby. She remained extremely scholarly during this period - "very hard working". But this was brought to an abrupt end when a colleague was promoted to a chair over her. In the light of this she approached Donal Winch, professor of economics, and the then pro-vice-chancellor, to ask him what her future at Sussex might hold.

"He knew I had a large graduate programme and more funded PhDs than most academics. He said to me that I was working in a contextual manner and that the future belonged to those whose work was acceptable to the Government, to industry and to the public."

Professor Rose left his office, went into Brighton, purchased a "violent lipstick" and started applying for chairs elsewhere. Warwick created a chair for her and agreed to take her funded PhD students as well "which any self-respecting enterprising institution would". Warwick must surely rejoice that it felt able to take the bolder step.

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