Promise & perdition
in the thought of Gillian Rose

edited by
PETER OSBORNE & HOWARD CAYGILL
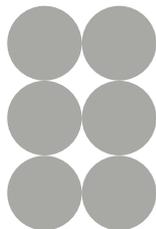
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Contents

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Books

Pamphlets

The Gillian Rose Memorial Lectures
Generously supported by the Tom Vaswani Family Education Trust

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Preface

PETER OSBORNE

The essays collected in this eighth volume from CRMEP Books derive from a conference on the thought of the British sociologist and philosopher Gillian Rose, held at Swedenborg Hall in Bloomsbury, London, 18–19 June 2025. Interest in Rose's wide-ranging body of critical work in the sociology and philosophy of modernity has grown significantly since her early death in 1995. In the wake of the publication of a Penguin Modern Classics edition of Rose's *Love's Work* (2024), along with some of her undergraduate lectures on critical theory from the University of Sussex at the end of the 1970s (*Marxist Modernism*, Verso, 2024), this thirty-year anniversary event set out to explore the play of promise and perdition – from which *Love's Work* itself departed – across the full span of her writings.

The conference solicited a range of generational responses to Rose's work, from former postgraduate students from the 1980s and early 1990s (Caygill, Tubbs, Gane), via authors of monographs on her work (Brower Latz, Schick) to a new generation of doctoral and postdoctoral researchers (Pafe, Hartnoll, Scott); alongside those for whom it is a distinctive voice with respect to more particular concerns (Cooper, Stimilli). It is interesting to see how the reception of the Kierkegaardian turn of Rose's *The Broken Middle* (1992) has

not taken recent readers away from the Hegel of *Hegel Contra Sociology* (1981) but rather back into the enduring philosophical meaning of that interpretation itself.

The conference followed four Gillian Rose Memorial Lectures (2019–2023) hosted by CRMEP with the support of the Tom Vaswani Family Educational Trust. These are available to download as e-pamphlets from CRMEP at www.crmep.co.uk. We are grateful to Tom Vaswani, once again, for his generous support of the production of this volume.

INTRODUCTION

Promise & perdition in the Rosean comedy

HOWARD CAYGILL

Promise and perdition are themes inseparable from the advice of Siloun the Athonite to 'keep your mind in hell, and despair not' that adorns the entrance to Gillian Rose's final book, *Love's Work.* With this epigraph Rose gives notice that hers will not be the hell of Dante's divine comedy where it is necessary to 'abandon all hope you who enter here'. But in spite or perhaps *because* of its solemnity, Rose found Siloun the Athonite's sentence comic, and not only in the Hegelian sense of the comic, but also as just stand-up perversely funny. When reading *Love's Work* aloud she would declaim the epigraph with raised eyebrows and a grin, seeing it as a perfect shibboleth or doorkeeper standing before the law or rather revel of *Love's Work*. Anyone approaching that book with what Rose called 'brutal sincerity' – an oxymoron for her – would disqualify themselves from entering the revel of sin, for the object was less 'despair not' than 'despair better'.

Rose was a close student of Hegel's *Aesthetics* and was highly attuned to his distinction between ancient and modern comedy. After the 'new art form' of Aristophanic comedy in which 'what is brought into the artistic portrayal is reality itself in the madness of its ruin, destroying itself within' and its successor in the prosaic new comedy, Hegel ends his lectures musing that 'the modern world has developed a type of comedy which is truly comic and

truly poetic. Here once again the keynote is good humour, assured and careless gaiety despite all failure and misfortune, exuberance and the audacity of a fundamental crazy happiness, folly and idiosyncrasy in general.'[1] With this intimation of a modern comedy Hegel seems to anticipate the 'careless gaiety despite failure and misfortune' programmatically staged in *Love's Work.* Surprisingly for readers of the *Aesthetics* who remain until the end, but not for readers of *Love's Work*, Hegel sees this comedy as allying with philosophy in bringing on 'the dissolution of art altogether' and intimating a new, future philosophical comedy.

Rose's compositional process from the *Dialectic of Nihilism* onwards was especially attentive to the poetic aspect of her writing, perhaps stung by criticism of the 'severe style' of *Hegel Contra Sociology*. She would send typescripts, sometimes manuscripts of her latest writing, to people she trusted, and two of them – myself and her genial cover designer Greg Bright – would be summoned to what she called, in deference to Greg Bright's rock'n'roll past, a 'soundcheck'. This involved reading her drafts aloud and revising them so that they *sounded* right. Greg brought his experience as a songwriter to bear on the rhythm and metrical signatures of Rose's sentences. He taught us how attention to rhythm and metre could intensify, undo, or in the best of cases *both* intensify and undo, the expression of a thought. And the intense self-dissolution of a thought through rhythm and metre, undoing the ostensibly conveyed meaning, conforms perfectly to Hegel's understanding of both the comic and the poetic.

The found object of the English translation of Siloun the Athonite's sentence is a perfect example of rhythm and metre working against ostensible sense. It is composed of nine syllables, six of which are trochees: *keep your mind in hell, and* with the last accent heavily accented by the comma after hell. These are

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1. *Hegel's Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, trans. T.M. Knox, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1998, pp. 511 and 1135.

followed by the flat, unaccentuated triplet of *despair not*. Three intensifying prosodic falls announce the constant falling and failing of *Love's Work* followed by the despairing monotony of 'despair not'. And the highest point of the deepest prosodic fall is 'hell', effecting a Blakean (and Swedenborgian) inversion of Heaven and Hell. Prosodically 'hell' is the high point of this sentence, making it *sound* the opposite of what it seems to *say.* This is the kind of mischief Rose aspired to in her later writing, the sin of language and lips in which sound comically belies meaning. This in itself is funny, but there is of course more to the thoughtful comedy in which the Athonite's sentence finds itself unwittingly implicated: for isn't despair – abandoning all hope – what makes for hell? How can you be in hell and not despair?

Siloun the Athonite's sentence makes sense in the context of Greek neo-Orthodox and Protestant Christianities that refuse the elaborate schema of a way of being in hell without despairing provided by the Catholic doctrine of purgatory. Throughout her authorship Rose would return constantly to Max Weber's savage description of the despairing Calvinists whose very predestined lives were hell, in the footnotes to *The Protestant Ethic and the 'Spirit' of Capitalism*, who sought to 'despair not' through the perverse 'love's work' of vainly seeking to labour in their calling. And she followed Hegel in seeing the ironies of despair as a new 'divine comedy'.

Rose introduces this thought in *Love's Work* through a characteristically cunning act of indirect communication on Dante's *Divine Comedy*. But she initially mentions only the 'eternal terraces of the Paradiso and the Inferno' turning only then to Hegel in order to rethink the absent Purgatorio. The Hegelian comedy that takes the place of Purgatory is the philosophy as social theory that appears here as the purgatorial working through of despair in love's work: 'It is power to be able to attend, powerful or powerless; it is love to laugh bitterly, purgatively, purgatorially,

and then to be quiet.'[2] There is of course all the difference in the world between a silence *before* despair and one *after* it has been worked through bitter laughter and carried beyond it to a new, unencumbered and perhaps quiet laughter.

Love's Work understands itself as a purgatorial comedy, a whisky-driven bacchanalian revel in which 'suffering may be held by laughter which is neither joyful nor bitter...'[3], an unaccentuated laughter of purgatory without purgation. It is a purgatorial comedy that is explicitly continued after *Love's Work*, for Rose did not follow her own advice to 'be quiet' but embarked on a modern Paradiso that would succeed her modern purgatory. It was a missed opportunity not to publish *Paradiso* alongside *Loves Work* in the recent Penguin edition since it offers a glimpse of the indispensable incompletion of the former work.

Yet *Paradiso* is neither bacchanalian revel nor repose, neither laughter nor silence, but like Hegel's logic of the concept it holds the contradiction disjunctively. Still back in the purgatory of *Love's Work*, Rose describes Hegel's laughter at all the falling and failing and all the 'crazy happiness' he speaks of; his finding 'the mismatch between aim and achievement comic, not cynical; holy not demonic'.[4] In *Paradiso*, purgatorial negations such as 'despair not', 'not cynical' and 'not demonic' are suspended even if Rose's *Paradiso* is not short of cynical and demonic laughter, nor of comic holiness. All is permitted in Rose's *Paradiso* because there is nothing to be lost or gained through purgatorial ascesis. There is no hope to abandon nor need for hope to be gained since *Paradiso* remembers that hope is the last and worst evil to be released from Pandora's box. This is an emancipated despair or liberation from hope, precisely the *Gelassenheit* or 'letting go' that is forbidden to the purgatorial consciousness of *Love's Work*.

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2. Gillian Rose, *Love's Work*, Chatto & Windus, London, 1995, p. 126.
3. Ibid., p. 134.
4. Ibid., p. 125.

There is holy comedy in the beautiful leave-taking framed in a metrical ascent of falling upwards. Rose tells us in the 'Mystical Theology' section of *Paradiso* that the book itself was born out of rhythm, the rhythm of 'think of sister Edme' chanted on the last London Euston to Coventry train – a line not otherwise renowned for its philosophical epiphanies:

> The beat of the train takes up your name ... [and] I will write a Paradiso that will be a series of descants on friends and family who have somehow passed beyond purgatory, who have dwelt in the abyss, in hell, and have undergone purgation.[5]

Then the rhythm dissolves as 'now the train lopes balmily homeward' in a now or eternal present that joins night and noon in a journey without end.

The last words of the last completed episode of *Paradiso* take distance from Simone Weil's inversion of the tree in *The Need for Roots.* This time riding the bus, Rose calls on the properties of the iambic metre to raise the Earth itself:

> The three lights of the future, the eternal present and the past: the promise of the candelabrum, the blazing fulfilment of the chandeliers, the sky guarding over gravestones and drawing trees. Three gates to heaven bestow their virtue onto the Earth.[6]

Rose's last words offer an ascending Earth placed before and beyond promise and perdition; the future first, the present forever and the past as poetic landscape of sky, graves and trees. All three lights issue from gates to heaven which it is no longer necessary to enter since they serve to raise and make of the Earth a Paradiso.

This *fröhliche Wissenschaft* that remains true to the Earth seems a fitting end to an authorship that began with a commitment to *Melancholy Science.*

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5. Gillian Rose, *Paradiso*, Menard Press, London, 1999, p. 22.
6. Ibid., p. 63.

BEGINNINGS

1

The Gillian Rose project

NIGEL TUBBS

How to understand Gillian Rose's project? Shapes of its afterlives are numerous: religious, literary, artistic, philosophical, political, cultural, sociological. Nevertheless, the project as a whole remains elusive. Perhaps the project died before its time? Or perhaps the project closed its own time? Perhaps Gillian was the last Hegelian? After all, who now reads Hegel? Alternatively, perhaps the totality of the project is being domesticated by its popularity among ephemeral readers who unintentionally and unironically assimilate it into that which it opposes? Who, then, can do justice to the Rose project? Not the modernist or the non-modernist; not the religious or the non-religious; not the philosopher or the non-philosopher; not the dialectical or the non-dialectical. Fateful for all of them, the project, instead, does justice to them by carrying their relationship to each other until they are, for themselves, something understood.

I first met Gillian Rose in 1986 when I joined the MA in Sociological Studies at Sussex University, which she ran with William Outhwaite.[1] She was running a module on 'The Sociol-

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1. This article retains the conversational style in which it was written for the opening of the conference 'Rosean Futures'.

The Sociology of Knowledge   Gillian Rose

The main texts in the Sociology of Knowledge are unified by two enterprises:

1) the attempt to transform Kantian epistemology into sociology by developing various metacritiques of the critical philosophy, literally a sociology of epistemology or knowledge.

2) the attempt to refute or transform Hegelian and Marxist philosophy of history by taking central categories and turning them into analytic and sociological ones.

Hence some acquaintance of the basic writings of Kant, Hegel and Marx is essential for understanding the preoccupations of the sociology of knowledge.

Rose's 'Sociology of Knowledge' course handout, MA Sociological Studies, University of Sussex, 1986–7.

ogy of Knowledge', which was based closely on chapter 1 of *Hegel Contra Sociology* (1981).[2]

She was doing sociology because she believed that it had inherited the neo-Kantian oppositions between law and ethics. Where Kant had worked with *transcendental* preconditions of possibility, sociology was working with *social* preconditions of possibility. And the sociology of knowledge was the meta-critical frontline: it explored how our knowing of preconditions is affected or compromised by those preconditions. What kind of truth, if any, is possible here?

Gillian Rose's whole project can, I think, be seen as one of struggling with this question of integrity within the pre-existing necessity of presupposition. She finds the modern self-consciousness of positing to be sociology, and she finds the exploration of illusion and complicity to be critical theory, especially in Adorno. For Hegel the *Science of Logic* is the tribunal in which positing holds itself to account, and is not afraid to publish that account, that doctrine, as its own logic. For Gillian, sociology and critical theory try to stage their own similar tribunal.

2. Gillian Rose, *Hegel Contra Sociology*, Athlone, London, 1981.

How significant is it, then, forty years later, that sociology of exactly this kind is under attack, especially in the USA, as being the basis for everything 'woke'. Since the 1960s its philosophy of contingency became part of the rhetoric of relativism in human affairs, meaning that no fixed identities of race, gender, nationality, biology, human or animal are possible, or, alongside this, that individuals cannot be blamed for their actions, their crimes or their immigration. The backlash against this relativism simmered, until it exploded into populist movements that decried the whole progressive and liberal sociological vision of the world. The central focus of Gillian's work, contingency and how to live with it, has become more, not less, politically volatile since her death.

But the world has changed dramatically since 1997. The extent to which Gillian's project can speak to the generations that come after her is questionable, partly because her work is grounded in universal – albeit *aporetic* universal – ideas at a time when universality is unfashionable. It can no longer simply be taken for granted that ideas are put forward in the public sphere, debated and fought over. Faith or trust in that very sphere and its intellectual activities has collapsed. The Gillian Rose project existed in those final moments when it was still the case that ideas could hold universal truths. Now, whatever the content or politics of such ideas, the real battle is in retrieving the credibility of ideas per se. Ideas have been flattened by the appeal of the more immediate, the visceral, the appeal to quick stimulation and quick thrill, and a growing addiction to them via social media. So-called postmodern philosophy helped to create the conditions for this. It undermined and then rejected the 'Idea', characterizing it as some kind of disembodied tyrannical essence that ruled, untouched, from above bodies and emotions. In the wake of this rejection lay the remains of the idea (the essence) of human being, of humanity, of a life shared or a life in common.

The Gillian Rose project explains both the experience and the science of this cancelling of the Idea, not by simply holding on to or alternatively rejecting some abstract notion of essence, but by yielding to the necessity of the equivocation of essence.

I would put it like this. Hegel's philosophy is an exercise in the integrity of presupposition. Kant got close. But Hegel pursued it relentlessly to the end, an end he called absolute, but by which he did not mean that the necessity of positing had been overcome, only that it had been understood. (We will return to the absolute later.) And by 'understood' he did not mean 'completed' and freed from presupposition. What was understood, including about understanding, was that positing carried thought and its object in the relationship of an owner and his property. The latter, the object, was posited as *for* the former, thought. This 'propertied' shape of knowing was what was already posited in positing.

Key here for Gillian was illusory being. (She once said to me, as an MA student, that the section on illusory being in the *Science of Logic* was the key to everything else in Hegel.) Thinking dogmatically, reflection could allow itself to think that it had indeed understood positing as its own self-reflective essence ('I think therefore I am'). Thinking sceptically, it could say that even this essence was just another illusion. This could then be logically extended to the eschewal of the idea of essence per se (*sic*), and, as well, of the essence of the Idea. But both dogma and scepticism are one-sided dominations of positing. They are both ways of avoiding integrity in the face of positing. Such illusory being, whether asserting or denying its reflective essence, is still within the propertied logic of owner and property. Reflection still grants itself the mastery of deciding whether the already posited object is or is not *of* and *for* the master. In doing so, illusory being allows itself to believe that it has avoided having to risk thinking more deeply about the fateful vicious circle or infinite regression that terrifies its practitioners and haunts all mastery.

Hegel Contra Sociology in particular shows the effects of illusion in neo-Kantian philosophy and sociology, but it also argues that the logic of illusion is still prevalent and will dominate future thinking in new ways. Gillian's publications after 1981 try to expose some of these. The Gillian Rose project from 1981 in effect says, *I told you so. I told you what happens when private property shapes all positing, including of itself. And I told you that this could be known even though, to the abstract consciousness, it looked impossible to know. The truth of abstraction can be known, absolutely.* But, we can ask in 2025, where is this work to be done now, where is this Rose project to be pursued? Gillian once said, in a talk at at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, that universities were crucial in sustaining the culture of critiquing the domination of the abstract. But the pervasiveness of illusion and the attack on the Idea has now gone deep into the universities. Who knows what kind of Rectoral speeches lie ahead?

I studied one term with William Outhwaite and I was due to study with Gillian after Christmas, but she was on sabbatical in early 1987. So I said to her that I could perhaps study on a module with the Education department – I was a practising secondary-school teacher, studying part time. *No*, she said, *we can't let those barbarians loose on you. You will study with me at my home.* And so I spent a challenging term trying to understand the master/slave relation from the *Phenomenology of Spirit* with her in her study in Chester Terrace, Brighton. I'm still trying to understand it.

Just before that, in December of 1986, in her university office, I asked her, why Hegel? Why is Hegel right and all the others wrong? She replied in two words: *subjective substance.*

It is worth just noting here that this came from a conversation we were having about 'middles', or, as we were calling them, 'magic thirds'. Gillian and I used to laugh about magic thirds, which claimed to be resolutions and reconciliations of

sociological dualisms. Our favourite, and the one that produced giggles, was Anthony Giddens's *structuration*, by which of course he meant making a middle out of the interminable opposition between structure and action.

Subjective substance and the absolute often bring a sense of unease when discussing Gillian's work, although perhaps less so in more recent publications. One of my experiences of her was how much she enjoyed generating this kind of discomfort. I attended the inaugural conference of the Nietzsche Society of Great Britain in Essex in the early 1990s, and Gillian, a guest speaker, opened with, 'Well, Nietzsche certainly wouldn't want this.'

So, in that spirit, I thought I'd open this conference with the discomfort of subjective substance and the absolute. But I am going to do so in an unusual way; not by academic description or defence, but by way of illustration through student experience. Or, more technically, as a series of relations and misapprehensions of student natural consciousness, or, again, by presenting their work and her work as a phenomenology. One of the afterlives of Gillian's work that I have been responsible for has been designing undergraduate and postgraduate degrees based on her thinking – or, as I have already referred to it, based on her project. I'm referring to it as the Rose project, but referring to her as Gillian, noting but not completely acceding to Peter Osborne's desire for the person and the work to be dispossessed of each other. Symbolic I think of the disagreements Peter has with Gillian, I'm offering the relation of Gillian and the project as that of subject and substance, while nominating the science of the project 'Rose'.

So, I'm going to speak of student experience. And I hope Gillian would approve. She told me once that at her interview for the job at Warwick University she was asked, 'What practical application does your work have in the real world?' She replied by saying that one of her PhD students (me) was a schoolteacher and planned to use the work to change the shape of education.

I take some relief, thirty years later, that Gillian's work is sympathetic to failure… but I did try.

I will get to the student experience in a minute. Let me just say something else about how I see her project. I think it is a coherent project, from start to finish. And I'm sure we'll discuss at some point in this conference its seeming to move from politics to religion.

I see it like this. The Rose project, from her 1976 article on how critical theory is possible, to the final notebooks in hospital, is a vigorous, relentless struggle to understand contingency and to live that understanding with integrity. Its Nietzscheanism is that it says Yes to contingency, and Yes to the contingency of that Yes. Its critical Hegelianism is that it says No to the abstract, and No to the abstraction of that No.[3] And by contingency I simply mean the conditions of our possibility.

Of course, this is not a new project. It has underpinned parts of the European philosophical tradition. Plato said we think not under conditions we choose but contingent upon the Forms. Kant said we understand not under conditions we choose but contingent upon the synthetic a priori. Marx said we make not under conditions we choose but contingent upon modern relations of production. Adorno said we criticize not under conditions we choose but contingent upon reification, perhaps total reification.

And their projects reached various conclusions. Plato thought we could live justly with this contingency. Kant thought we might know its freedom but not its truth. Marx thought this contingency had the seeds of its own self-overcoming. And Adorno feared that the critical consciousness required for that overcoming might in fact be impossible.

Enter the Rose project. In her PhD and the writing of 1976–79 she distils earlier experiences of contingency into a question, or

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3. I thank Robert Lucas Scott for this reminder of the 'No'.

a tribunal. Is critical consciousness still possible if no objective distance exists between objects and a critical awareness of their illusory appearance? If reification is total, is critical theory coherent?

Facing these melancholic questions, Gillian takes from Adorno the idea that objects do not go into their concepts without leaving a remainder. In other words, if totality was watertight there wouldn't be a tribunal at all. Yes, contingency predetermines us; and yes, therefore we can never know it or criticize it objectively, or at a complete distance. *But we do know it*. As such, on page 48 of her Adorno book, she says she does not see reification as total. Rather, following Adorno, she sees the concept of totality as reified. The project embarks on the struggle to understand how totality here is unknowable but still, somehow, *we do know it*. Or, technically, the *but we do know it* is the in-itself, lost to being for-another, and then this not-knowing is lost again to being for-itself.

And the questions, 'what kind of knowledge? and what kind of truth, if any, is this, *but we do know*?' is I think where the action forms around Gillian. And it seems to be all things to all people. Some of her religious readers find God here. Some of her political readers find an aberrated Marxism, while some more recently have found again the idea of a renewed critical Marxism. Zygmunt Bauman found postmodernism here. Literary readers have enjoyed it as the theatre of style. For some it is where we find the equivocation of the middle. Many, including Jay Bernstein, have understood it as 'excess'.

For Gillian, in the very early writing, the *but we do know* implied a utopian possibility of the rational identity of concept and object. The fate of this identity is, I would suggest, one of the things that brings us all here today to think about her work.

Student experience

How did the project develop after 1979? As I have said, I will illustrate this through student experience on the university degrees on which I have taught. It means some shortcuts, and, as they say, whilst it is based on actual events, any coincidence with the experience of any one student alive or dead is purely coincidental.

Students arrive. From the experience that they have of the texts that we bring to them, from Socrates and Plato onwards, questions emerge about society and justice. Inevitably this leads to us asking together, what is critical thinking? Are you critical thinkers? Is critical thinking possible? Yes, they say, immediately; we hope so, they say, after some reflection; perhaps not, they say, after their own attempts to change the world are frustrated. No, they say, when all such attempts appear to be self-defeating and, as they often express their experience of totality, the system just keeps winning. It's all sown up. Their experiences encapsulate the Rose project from 1976 to 1979.

Then, when they look at how critical reason tries to respond to its own complicity within this totality, or the system, students find the dialectic of enlightenment. Enlightenment, whether by name or not, was already their key tool in changing the world. You see through illusions, the scales fall from your eyes, and then you go out and enlighten others, and the world changes. Except that, in a sown-up totality, even enlightenment does not change things but only reproduces its own conditions of possibility. Hopeful and perhaps radical student thinking falls into an abyss of infinite regression.

I expect many of us have had something of this experience at some time. The current manifestation of this infinite regression to nothingness is the widely reported 'student disengagement'.

Their critical consciousness, now redundant in the world, resigns itself and says *just tell me what I need for my essay*.

To this, Gillian's 1970s work offers *style*, a form of subjectivity that can live with contingency without the need for fantasies of immunity from or standpoints beyond contingency. Style (unlike the idea of total reification) has this *relation* to its illusion or appearance. It looks like an integrity in living with the '*but we do know* our conditions of possibility'. So, do students find style here in their moments of difficulty with enlightenment? They do, but not exactly the kind that the Gillian Rose project commends.

On offer to students is the style of a new postmodern ethics. The postmodern – used in the widest and most sweeping sense that Gillian uses it in her inaugural lecture at Warwick (1993) and elsewhere – says to them: 'All your problems, all the self-contradictions of critique, all the dead ends, can be blamed on reason. Reason, from the ancients onwards, was on an imperialist anthropocentric campaign to assert and defend its position in the Great Chain of Being.[4] Anything above it or superior was unknowable. Anything below it was knowable as inferior, including women, other races and cultures, plants and nature. It has been responsible for misogyny, racism, oppression, colonialism, slavery. You can leave this whole tradition behind, cancel it. Instead of the *hierarchy* of differences, we can offer a new ethic of difference, a new relation to the other. We can even offer something called authenticity.'

I think it is noticeable that at this point students and many of their lecturers board the train of difference still carrying a rational ticket. The new pluriverse is often a loose version of a kind of mutual recognition taken beyond the anthropocentric and simply made inclusive of everything. Students and lecturers ride this postmodern train with a rational ticket, but really the ticket

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4. See https://socratesontrial.org/the-great-chain-of-being.

for this train is issued and validated by another train company altogether. And here is the second moment of the Gillian Rose project. This validating company is what Gillian explores in *Dialectic of Nihilism*. In her terms, the nothingness of reason that the students experienced styles itself now as self-perficient or self-completing nihilism. This self-perficient nihilism, she says, is active in asserting the death of metaphysics; but it is passive regarding its own preconditions when it leaps from representation to immediate affirmations of promise or presence, and it is passive, therefore, in regard to its own implication or contingency within law and ethics, within the tradition. Gillian finds a lack of integrity with contingency here at what she calls the bottom rungs of the phenomenological ladder.[5] Any notion of authenticity here is just a shape of illusory being, positing an essence that is immune from itself.

But in the Gillian Rose project, and for the students, self-perficient nihilism is experienced as a *dialectic* of nihilism. Students often have a very simple and direct way of expressing this. 'All these people who say that they are postmodern are just like the moderns. They are still claiming they are right, or enlightened about things, and still telling everyone else how to understand the world properly.' Modern myth becomes post-modern enlightenment, and postmodern enlightenment returns to modern myth. Here is the dialectic of nihilism. The trouble is that we have been here before. It's just another vicious dialectical circle leading nowhere.

And so, again, it all collapses, and the students fall back on *just tell me what I need for my essay…*

This despairing rationalism is rich soil for the Gillian Rose project. Keep your mind in hell she says, and despair not. So

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5. Gillian Rose, *Dialectic of Nihilism*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1984, p. 210.

what contribution can the project make here at this moment for the students?

In the Hegel book we learn (from the Introduction to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*) that scepticism or doubt is self-perficient when, despairing at itself, it doubts its own presuppositions. This is its conscious insight into its untruth. This is Hegel's game-changing observation. We think that truth is unthinkable. But this judgement has its condition of possibility in the positing that truth or substance is on one side and thinking of truth or subjectivity is on the other. This fear of falling into error – thinking the truth – is in fact a finite error that presupposes the finite is *not* already part of how truth is conceived. And if, in addition, you know the finite and therefore the infinite to have a social and political shape, then (and it's often taken to be one of the Rose project's most difficult challenges) the idea we have of truth is already the idea we have of our social and political selves; it is subjective substance.

If you presume you *can't* think the absolute, then you excuse yourself from having already presupposed the absolute *according to* its social and political contingency. This exclusion, whether meaning to or not, becomes a politics, which presumes that truth (and I think you could also add here logic) lies outside of politics.[6] Whether judging the truth of a universal class, or of a non-universal otherness, or of a religion, or of styles of art, the part played by the finite in already presupposing what the truth is, and isn't, has to be included. Otherwise, our contingency within social and political relations is excluded.

Just a thought here. Self-perficient doubt, doubt doubting itself, enters the pathway of despair. But, as Gillian says, this

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6. I have Socrates discuss two logics, the logic of mastery and the logic of education, during his retrial in my *Socrates On Trial*, Bloomsbury, London, 2021. See also Nigel Tubbs, 'Gillian Rose and Education', *Telos* 173, Winter 2015, pp. 125–43; and Nigel Tubbs, *God, Education and Modern Metaphysics: The Logic of 'Know Thyself'*, Routledge, New York, 2015.

path is not just negative. It is not a closed path. Why not? Because it does not despair at its despair. It's not total. Even despair does not go into its concept without leaving a remainder. *We do know this despair*. As such, I wonder, to be really consistent here, if this is less 'Keep your mind in hell and despair not' but rather 'Keep your mind in despair because despair is not, after all, hell.'

So, what *is* doubt now in the project? The answer to this question moves us from style to the *science of style*, or from Adorno to Hegel. Thinking doubting itself is not closed totality or infinite regression. It is triadic. One way of putting it is that immediacy is lost to mediation; mediation is returned to immediacy; and the experience of their relation is the third partner. What was only implied in Adorno and carried by style now, in the Hegel book, finds its own science. In the Hegel book Gillian points out that spirit, recognition and actuality in Hegel all have this triadic structure.

You might think that this is not the kind of thing that will excite disengaged students. That is not my experience of the Gillian Rose project. For the students it provokes re-engagement. It offers phenomenology. They can now explore, or re-cognize as Gillian might say, previous content differently through the triadic phenomenological experience of that content. Additionally, now as subjective substance, or in relation to truth, they can explore these experiences – the ones that previously left them cold and dispirited and disengaged and disenchanted and resigned – as formative, even as self-determinative. Their experiences can speak for themselves. And why is this not just a chat about how they feel? Because the project also offers the science of these experiences. Subjective substance and the absolute are now the science of style or of *but we do know*.

Briefly, what does this re-engagement look like? Students want to learn about the project because in reading about it they

are reading about themselves. They get help initially from *Love's Work*, which tells of the difficulty of understanding and living as subjective substance through noses, cancer, love relationships, doctor/patient relationships, families and death. Its final chapter helps to unpack the intellectual journey a little and to see how it – the *but we do know* – can be understood within the tradition very differently. They like the term 'broken middle', particularly as a way of capturing the ambiguities of negating and yet also preserving identity. And they like the idea that reason is a friend that you don't have to dump just because that friendship demands constant renegotiation.[7]

There are many other avenues for them, but I'm going to break off here to end on four observations on what the students might make of the politics of the project.

First, and perhaps above all, the project gives difficulty – personal and professional – renewed social and political meaning. Working in threes, with the third partner, gives a different kind of meaning to the critique of mastery and its intrigues than does an eternally returning dialectic of enlightenment.[8]

Second, the self-determination we've been talking about is not some kind of existential self-help. Gillian is damning of such an idea in *Love's Work*. This re-engagement with contingency is re-engagement with the social. Gillian called it a political theology. I prefer *paideia* taken, somewhat loosely, to refer to the life – the living – of *politeia* in its two senses: these are *city* matters and the city *matters*.

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7. An idea found in the Introduction to Gillian Rose, *Judaism and Modernity*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1993.

8. Examples include: the climate activist who takes contingency as a critique of her own mastery in running community projects; the trans students, who, through their transitioning at university, found the fluidity of subjective substance as a self-determination that could hold the ambiguities of identity within itself; the teacher who finds truth in the experience of learning rather than in the national curriculum; and the co-ordinator of care services who wants to re-engage jaded care professionals with thinking education rather than training.

Third, and I think of real importance for the present moment, this triadic thinking is also a re-engagement with the universal. Using the UK National Health Service as an example, thinking about the universal involves not just the universal entitlement to free medical care for each particular. That is just an abstract or formal entitlement. Thinking universally means *triage*; the practice of the triadic, that is, judging how to treat everyone the same, or equally, by treating them differently, according to their singular contingencies.

Fourth, contingency grounds the fluidity in which abstract masteries have been undermined and new rights for the un-recognized have been fought for and won. But, as noted earlier, the universality of contingency is under attack in the present culture wars as the fake truth of everything woke. Not the least of which is that university courses that teach for contingency, and perhaps even about contingency, are being closed.

It is questionable whether the modern European philosophical tradition, and with it progressive politics, has any clear response to this. There is yet to emerge a way or indeed ways of re-engaging people with the universal. This attack on contingency also comes from a real sense of injustice. It carries the feeling that contingency benefits others, but not me – *'they' always get doctors' appointments and social housing and jobs because their cultural backgrounds have to be compensated for.* Such a view expresses how people currently experience contingency not as their attachment to the universal but as their exclusion from it.

In the language of the Gillian Rose project this viewpoint says to the liberal elite: *We know that your concepts don't go into your objects, because we are your objects and your concepts don't go into us.*

If people feel excluded from the universal, then no wonder they seek alternative truths that they can find themselves includ-ed within. And a different style of contingency, a different style

of *but we do know*, a privatized version, is on offer, one that turns *ressentiment* at contingency into immediate, selectively inclusive masteries. Some of these are very familiar: for example, *but we do know* that men and women are fixed biological identities; and *but we do know* that races are not the same. And populism takes this *but we do know* to the bottom of the phenomenological ladder, where the identity of concept and object is accepted as common sense. Here immediate dishonesty is seen by disillusioned people as more honest than the 'fake' truths of contingency, especially the contingencies of the views and ideas of experts and academics.

So, how might the project intervene? If, as Gillian says, illusions are not false, and if, as she also says, films could be made that allow for dialectical experiences of fascism, rather than safe voyeuristic ones, then the project might consider how to relate differently to regressive sentiments than simply as 'them and us'.[9] It might explore how to retrieve the universality of contingency from its currently privatized version.

I end with this thought, couched in terms of recent UK educational history, and recollective of a conversation with Gillian in her kitchen in 1987. Plato's *Republic* and the Gillian Rose project are about the soul and the city; they are *paideia*.[10] Both have 'an educative, a political intent'.[11] But where Plato, in the *Republic*, differentiated his universal thinking, his tripartite *paideia*, into differently educated social classes, the Rose project offers tripartite *paideia* comprehensively, without naturalized appearances of abilities. Alas, in the conversation in her kitchen, I don't think I ever did manage to convince her of that.

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9. See chapter 2 of Gillian Rose, *Mourning Becomes the Law*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1996.
10. This came together at the conference 'The Soul and the City' that was happening in the Department of Sociology at Warwick on the day she died, 9 December 1995.
11. Rose, *Hegel Contra Sociology*, p. 217.

2

Eternal futures: Gillian Rose at Warwick

NICHOLAS GANE

My first encounter with Gillian was in 1990 as a first-year student at the University of Warwick. Gillian had just arrived in the department of sociology, and had been allocated teaching on the module 'Theorizing Modern Society'. The lecture slots on Marx, Weber and Durkheim had already been taken, so she taught the work of Georg Simmel. She began with his 1904 lecture on fashion,[1] citing passages in German to explain the relation between form and content, subject and object, as well as the tragedy of modern culture and the meaning of *Lebensphilosophie*. From this point on she developed a following at Warwick: students flocked to new courses she taught on Frankfurt School critical theory. They were similar in content to those she had taught previously at Sussex,[2] centring on the relation of politics and aesthetics, but at Warwick they worked through philosophical, sociological and literary pairings: Hegel with Kleist, Nietzsche with Kafka, Adorno and Benjamin with Ibsen and others.

This style of teaching, which was genuinely interdisciplinary, ranged across sociology, philosophy, art, music, theology and

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1. Georg Simmel, 'Fashion' (1904), *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 62, no. 6, 1957, pp. 541–58.
2. Gillian Rose, *Marxist Modernism*, Verso, London, 2024; Nicholas Gane, 'Review of Gillian Rose, *Marxist Modernism*', *Theory, Culture & Society*, vol. 41, nos 7–8, 2024, pp. 279–84.

literature. Many students complained that 'this is too difficult', but Gillian's answer was consistent and uncompromising: '*life is difficult!*' There could be no argument as she was right, and in spite of, or perhaps because of, their difficulty her lectures and classes were always packed. Students were drawn to Gillian as, through brilliant readings of texts that at the outset looked impenetrable, she addressed fundamental questions of life, death, love, power and ethics, which at that time were all but absent from the sociological curriculum. More than once she reminded her students of Weber's distinction between those who live off the vocation of politics, and those that live *for* that vocation.[3] Gillian was firmly committed to the latter, and for this reason there was and could be no separation between her life and her work, between vocation and calling, or what Weber calls (in *The Protestant Ethic and Spirit of Capitalism*) *Beruf*.

Gillian founded the MA in Social and Political Thought at Warwick, but it did not run in 1993–94 because of her illness, which at the time students knew nothing about. The course ran for the final time in 1994–95 and was structured around a core module entitled 'The Sociological Tradition'. For those with a background in sociology this tradition was largely unrecognizable, as it started with Plato and Aristotle, and covered writings by Aquinas, Hobbes, Rousseau, Paine, Burke, Wollstonecraft, Kant and Hegel, before concluding where many other sociology courses would begin, with Weber. The classes for this module were taught in Gillian's office, and each week between 10 and 15 students would cram into the space, which had been designed to hold less than half that number. We would sit in near darkness as Gillian detested the light emitted from the fluorescent tubes mounted on her office ceiling. With the onset of winter she would turn on a single anglepoise lamp placed on the floor;

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3. Max Weber, *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, Routledge, London, 1948.

we would struggle to read passages of books, and even to see each other, in the fading light. She joked that her office was like Plato's cave, but it was only partly a joke, which became clear when we read Weber's 'Science as a Vocation' and she explained his reference to Plato and the confusion between concept and reality/shadow and light.[4] She was making a serious point: don't be afraid to think the absolute or that which presents itself as unthinkable,[5] and also don't be afraid to question neo-Kantian distinctions between fact and value that render the noumenal realm inaccessible and, more than this, strip sociology of political expression and involvement in the name of 'value freedom'.

For many, Gillian's classes were a nerve-racking experience, as she was committed to a Socratic method of teaching and could ask students the most searching and difficult questions without warning. Some would try to hide in her 'blind spot' by taking a chair in the corner of her office, just out of her line of sight. But, of course, she anticipated this strategy, and would question those people in particular. There could be no hiding, no wilful ignorance, no compromise, and no resignation of any sort. Gillian's teaching mirrored Weber's understanding of Socratic *elenchus*. Weber observes in his lecture 'Science as a Vocation' that 'In Greece, for the first time, appeared a handy means by which one could put the logical screws upon somebody so that he could not come out without admitting either he knew nothing or that this and nothing else was truth, the *eternal* truth.'[6] For Gillian, the task was not to follow Plato by using concepts to discover the path to what Weber calls 'true being', but instead to follow a second thread from 'Science as a Vocation': to 'open the way for knowing and for teaching how to act [rightly] in life and, above all, act as a citizen of the state, for this question was everything

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4. Ibid., p. 140.
5. Nicholas Gane, 'Gillian Rose and the Promise of Speculative Sociology', *Journal of Classical Sociology*, 2025, https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1468795x241312298.
6. *From Max Weber*, p. 141.

to Hellenic man, whose thinking was political throughout'.[7] If Gillian put the 'screws' upon her students, it was for exactly this reason, and it was to ask: what does it mean to live an ethical life; how can one live both politically and ethically; and how can power be reconciled with responsibility or perhaps even love for an other?

Indeed, Gillian framed this course on the sociological tradition with what she called a 'provocative' question: why should I be moral? This question comes from Plato's *Republic*, which, in the simile of the cave, reflects on the 'form of the good', and asks whether we can 'be responsible for whatever is right and valuable in everything'. More than this, *The Republic* questions whether power can be exercised through law-making and legislation, not to promote 'the special welfare of any particular class in our society but of the society as a whole'.[8] On this point, Gillian directed students to Plato's *Politics*, which identifies a fundamental tension in political life: that, 'though man is born with weapons which he can use in the service of practical wisdom and virtue, it is all too easy for him to use them for opposite purposes'. Here, she argued, lies the value of the state, which for Plato is 'both natural and prior to the individual' and defined by the virtue of justice, for 'justice is the arrangement of the political association, and a sense of justice decides what is just'. But, if this is the case, then what type of political association is best suited to produce justice? How is justice to be reconciled with the thirst for political power? And what, exactly, is the 'just'? Moreover, Gillian asked, what has happened to Plato's ideal of the 'philosopher ruler'? Is this ideal really 'not impossible', as Plato suggests, and if so what 'sketch in the outline of the social system' should philosophers start by drawing?[9]

7. Ibid., p. 141.
8. Plato, *The Republic*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1987, pp. 316–25, 321, 323–4.
9. Plato, *The Politics*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1981, pp. 61, 260–325, 297.

Next, Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, and more questions: what is virtue? How can we live a virtuous life? What is the importance of practical wisdom (*phronesis*), and how should we understand and position ourselves in relation to Aristotle's idea of the ethical 'mean'? At the heart of Aristotle's ethics is a table of 'virtues and vices' that positions a 'sphere of action or feeling' on one axis against its 'excess, mean and deficiency' on the other. In the sphere of 'fear and confidence', for example, excess is marked by 'rashness', deficiency 'cowardice' and the mean 'courage'.[10] Gillian implored her students to consider the value and possibility of realizing the mean, along with the real-life consequences of excess and deficiency, for all ten virtues and vices listed by Aristotle (others include: social conduct, anger, pleasure, shame and dishonour). Each vice and virtue was considered in turn, and again there could be no hiding.

In the following weeks, Machiavelli and Hobbes were read as bridges between the ancient and modern worlds. From Machiavelli, Gillian asked: what is the relation between virtue and *virtù*, the latter being the capacity to act effectively and decisively in the political arena, even if it means employing unethical or immoral methods? At the core of *The Prince* are a series of ethical reflections on how power can or should be reconciled with ethical conduct, including: 'how a prince must govern his conduct towards his subjects and friends'; how to rule virtuously and risk coming 'to grief among so many who are not virtuous'; how to reconcile generosity and parsimony; and whether those with power should be cruel or compassionate, or, in Machiavelli's words, 'whether it is better to be loved than feared, or the reverse'.[11] And from the earlier (1571) *Discourses*, Gillian posed a fundamental question, later addressed by Weber: is it acceptable to use means of violence in pursuit of good ends?

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10. Aristotle, *Ethics*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1976, p. 104.
11. Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1981, pp. 90–92, 95.

Machiavelli's answer, as is well known, is in principle 'yes': 'It is a sound maxim that reprehensible actions may be justified by their effects, and that when the effect is good … it always justifies the action. For it is the man who uses violence to spoil things, not the man who uses it to mend them that is blameworthy.' More than this, against Aristotle, Machiavelli declares that, while 'most men prefer to steer a middle course' between being 'wholly good or wholly bad', in practice this is 'very harmful' as rarely do they not know how to be either of these things. For this reason, virtue should not be associated with an aspiration for finding a 'mean' position.[12]

Gillian was drawn to Machiavelli's concept of *fortuna*, and asked how we can deal with circumstances or events that are both unforeseen and not necessarily of our own making. She insisted on an active mediation of fate; a position she develops in detail in *The Broken Middle*, where she reconsiders Freud's two ideas of risk, alongside Kierkegaard's writings on beginning and anxiety, and argues that 'life must be risked in order to be gained; that only by discovering the limit of life – death – is "life" itself discovered, and recalcitrant otherness opens its potentialities and possibilities'.[13] Amid lofty considerations of power, justice, tyranny and violence in *The Prince*, and six types of government in the *Discourses*, there was a memorable moment of humour in the class on Machiavelli. Gillian never drove a car, and used to take the bus from Leamington Spa to the university campus; she directed us to a footnote buried deep in *The Discourses*. It reads: 'Machiavelli does not say that all men are wicked, but simply that legislators are wise to act as if this were true, i.e. "Always drive your car as if both the man in front of you and the man behind are lunatics".'[14] Again, it was a joke with

12. Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Discourses*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1970, pp. 132, 177.
13. Gillian Rose, *The Broken Middle: Out of Our Ancient Society*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1992, p. 16.
14. Machiavelli, *The Discourses*, p. 529.

serious intent, and we were left wondering, as Freud might ask, what made it funny.

From Machiavelli to Hobbes: rather than pursue an obvious reading of sovereign power, Gillian instead considered *Leviathan* against the backdrop of Franz Neumann's 1942 *Behemoth*, which returns to Hobbes's conception of human nature to question the limits of statehood under national socialism, and the lawless-ness, violence and terror of its dictatorial and 'racial' form of capitalism.[15] Gillian reread *Leviathan* to ask what it means to be a 'person', to consider the value of friendship, and to question the 'value or worth of a man' in relation to his 'price', which, Hobbes says, is always something 'dependent on the need and judgement of another' – i.e. it is something *social*.[16]

These were recurrent themes considered in the following weeks on Rousseau, Wollstonecraft, Paine, Kant and Hegel. Gillian questioned the elusive notion of the social that underpins Rousseau's idea of contract, and his ideas of popular sovereignty and nationalism. And she objected to Wollstonecraft's ideas of rights and community for, while predating those of Marx, they are premised on a defence of rights on the grounds of reason that then does not subject reason itself to critique. On Paine, Gillian asked whether it is, in fact, the case that 'all men are born equal, and with natural right', and whether governments can really be 'comprehended under three heads: superstition, power, and the common interest of society, and the common rights of man', or what Paine otherwise calls 'priestcraft', 'conquerors' and 'reason'.[17] This, in turn, underpinned a reading of Kant on enlightenment, and of Hegel on natural law and the relation between civil society and the state.

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15. Franz Neumann, *Behemoth: The Structure and Practice of National Socialism*, Victor Gollancz, London, 1942, p. 90.

16. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1985, pp. 217, 151–2.

17. Thomas Paine, *Rights of Man*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1985, p. 69.

A detailed reading of Hegel was central to a companion MA module taught by Robert Fine, and so Gillian addressed the work of Kant instead. She was particularly interested in Kant's *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, which she framed as an introduction to the *Critique of Judgement*, and which addresses many of the earlier concerns of Hobbes. The *Groundwork* is best known for its formulation of the categorical imperative and idea of the universal: 'I ought never to act in such a way that *I could not also will that the maxim on which I act should be a universal law.*' Gillian observed that a comparable statement can be found in Hobbes's *Leviathan*, which argues that moral philosophy can be distilled into the principle 'Do not do that to another, which thou wouldest not have done to thy selfe.'[18] What, though, of the practical and political application of this principle? Gillian questioned Kant's idea of duty and his deontological ethics by taking students to key passages in the *Groundwork* that ask, among other things: Should we make promises that we intend not to keep? What is the sincerity of friendship? And how can we resist the temptation to turn self-love into a universal law?

For Gillian, a sociological concept of altruism sits at the heart of Kant's *Groundwork*: for why 'see others who have to struggle with great hardships' when one could easily help, and yet think 'What does it matter to me?'[19] Moreover, Gillian found in Kant an implicit response to the libertarian and neoliberal politics she vehemently opposes in the introduction to *Mourning Becomes the Law*. Against a definition of freedom as the 'right to purchase and consume goods and services', which presupposes and widens an 'already unequal distribution of opportunities and resources within a capitalist society',[20] Gillian positioned Kant's distinction

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18. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, p. 224.
19. Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, Routledge, London, 1991, p. 86.
20. Gillian Rose, *Mourning Becomes the Law: Philosophy and Representation*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1996, pp. 4–5.

between (market) price and dignity. Kant writes, in an implicit response to Hobbes, that 'In the kingdom of ends everything has either a *price* or a *dignity*. If it has a price, something else can be put in its place as an *equivalent*; if it is exalted above all price and so admits of no equivalent then it has a dignity.'[21] This, for Gillian, was a central statement of a moral and political philosophy that runs from Kant to Marx and beyond; one in which human life is not reducible to an exchange value or price, but has dignity and value in and of itself.

The final class from that year, just a few months before Gillian died, was on Max Weber. There was another session scheduled on Hannah Arendt, but at that time *Origins of Totalitarianism* was out of print. Gillian tried to photocopy sections of the text and distribute them ahead of the class, but students had little time to read them. Weber, though, was the ideal figure to end with, as his later work addresses the relation of politics and ethics in detail. In line with the argument of her *Hegel Contra Sociology*, Gillian turned to Weber's lecture 'Science as a Vocation' to question the historical value of science, assert that there can be no science without values or presuppositions, and to argue that we should be suspicious of any science that makes this claim. In teaching Kant, Gillian had asked two searching questions. First, can 'reason' – theoretical, practical, or reflective – ever be pure? And, second, does the categorical imperative haunt pure reason? Through Weber, Gillian answered 'no' to the first question, and 'yes' to the second. While most students already knew about Weber's interpretative method and commitment to objectivity in social science, few were prepared for the passages in 'Science as a Vocation' that address death, which were central for Gillian, and which she returns to, posthumously, in *Mourning Becomes the Law*.[22] Weber declares:

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21. Kant, *Groundwork*, p. 96.
22. Rose, *Mourning Becomes the Law*, pp. 129–30.

civilized man, placed in the midst of the continuous enrichment of culture by ideas, knowledge, and problems, may become 'tired of life' but not 'satiated with life'. He catches only the most minute part of what the life of the spirit brings for ever anew, and what he seizes is always something provisional and not definitive, and therefore death for him is a meaningless occurrence. And because death is meaningless, civilized life is meaningless; by its very 'progressiveness' it gives death the imprint of meaninglessness.[23]

These passages of 'Science as a Vocation', which had barely received mention in Weber scholarship at that time, were crucial for Gillian, as they question the value of modern scientific culture and ideals of 'progress', and more fundamentally what gives death and (with this) life meaning. Characteristically, Gillian followed Weber when he went on to ask, in the face of the above, 'What stand should one take?'

Gillian describes Weber's 'Science as a Vocation' and 'Politics as a Vocation' as 'twin, magnificent, inexhaustible essays from 1919'.[24] 'Science as a Vocation' in fact dates as a lecture from 1917, and asks, in the midst of World War I: what is the meaning of death? What can be lasting, and what can deliver genuine and lasting human fulfilment? 'Politics as a Vocation' was delivered in 1919, just over a year before Weber's own death, and addresses the demands of political leadership and the 'ethical paradoxes' that come with the exercise of power. In a fitting summation to Gillian's module on the sociological tradition, Weber asks: What relations do ethics and politics actually have? How can we reconcile conviction with responsibility? How can we reconcile that which, seemingly, cannot be reconciled? Weber's answer to this challenge posed earlier by Machiavelli is that the 'diabolical' forces of politics and the passionate devotion to a 'cause' must, at all times, be tempered by responsibility as the 'guiding star of

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23. Weber, *From Max Weber*, p. 140.
24. Rose, *Mourning Becomes the Law*, p. 129.

action'. And for this to happen 'a sense of proportion is needed'.[25] This is what Weber calls *augenmass*.[26] Gillian read it through Aristotle as a form of practical wisdom, and through Kant as a form of practical reason or judgement.

Vocation

Unbeknownst to us at the time, these classes were Gillian's final act; a gift to her students and a gift to a future in which the relation between politics and ethics has become ever more of a concern. Only later, on reading *Love's Work*, did her students understand how ill Gillian had been through this final year of teaching at Warwick. But no matter how painful and invasive the treatments must have been for her illness, she never missed or was late for a single class. This was her *vocation*. In answer to Weber in 'Science as a Vocation', it was what gave life meaning and fulfilment, and nothing could have been more important at that moment than those final classes on virtue, value, fate, violence, power, love and death. Through teaching and author-ship, Gillian found the possibility of continued life outside the constraints of time in what she termed, in the posthumously published *Mourning Becomes the Law*, 'eternity'.

In late 1995, while teaching these final MA classes, Gillian was interviewed by Andy O'Mahony of RTE Radio. This interview contains the following lines:

> [Eternity]: It's the only thing I believe in. If there is eternity, then it's now, and it's at all time. So it's the only thing you can believe in, because, after all, time is devastation. You can't believe in time. Time is going to destroy you. You can't believe in time, you have to believe in eternity.

And:

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25. Weber, *From Max Weber,* pp. 118, 115, 15.
26. See Nicholas Gane, 'Max Weber on the Ethical Irrationality of Political Leadership', *Sociology*, vol. 31, no. 3, 1997, pp. 549–64.

> There's this awful divorce between philosophy, which thinks it's
> interested in ethics, and social and political thought, which is
> more sociological. They've got to be brought together somehow...
> everybody's looking for an ethics. But in fact they should be looking
> for a political theology. We need to think about God and the polis
> and not about this anodyne 'love ethic'.[27]

The second of these passages is easier to resolve than the first.
In the final conversation I had with Gillian, I told her I was going
to do a PhD on Max Weber (her 'second favourite thinker'), and
she asked me why it isn't possible to have a politics based on love.
This was so typical of Gillian: her mind was always working
ahead and beyond, and at such a pace that you could barely
keep up. Her question followed from our reading of Aristotle in
the MA module that year, which asked whether justice can be
based upon friendship as a form of moral virtue. But Gillian was
also pushing further by reminding me of Weber's definition of
the state as exercising a monopoly over the 'legitimate' means
of violence within a territory, and that the forces of power, for
Weber, are diabolical in nature and are potentially intoxicating.
They are, thus, anything but 'anodyne'. Gillian was also alluding
to the passages on love, rationalism and disenchantment, and
the relation of love to other 'life orders', including the 'political
sphere', in Weber's 'Intermediate Reflection' to his Sociology of
Religion, which Gerth and Mills refer to by its subtitle 'Religious
Rejections of the World and Their Directions'; a text she knew
well.[28] Weber of all thinkers, for her, showed exactly why politics
could not be based on a 'love ethic', and why it would be a tragic
mistake to think otherwise.

Gillian's references to eternity through her later writings and
final interview are more complex. Rather than think about them
through a religious or theological lens, which was not something

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27. Vincent Lloyd, 'Interview with Gillian Rose', *Theory Culture & Society*, vol. 25, nos
7–8, 2008, pp. 201–18; pp. 217, 210.
28. Weber, *From Max Weber*, pp. 78, 116, 323–59.

Gillian herself did in her final classes, I will turn to the work and life of Zygmunt Bauman to understand them. This is not a wild jump as Gillian and Zygmunt corresponded at length, and Bauman wrote a review of *The Broken Middle* for the journal *Economy and Society*.[29]

In 2003 I visited Zygmunt at his family home in Leeds, and he gave me a copy of the manuscript of his latest book – *Wasted Lives* – that he had just posted to his publisher. Zygmunt knew I had studied with Gillian, and he knew too that this book would change my understanding of her later work. In *Wasted Lives* there is a key excursus on culture and eternity. Bauman writes:

> We … know that we are mortal – bound to die. This knowledge is difficult to live with. Living with such knowledge would be downright impossible were it not for culture … an invention making all other inventions possible … a contraption to render the human kind of living, the kind of living that entails knowledge of mortality, bearable … it manages to *recast the horror of death into a moving force of life*.[30]

Bauman returns to this idea that 'eternity is the work of the imagination' in his posthumously published and very beautiful memoir, *My Life in Fragments*, in which he writes that he has lived twice: his first life, the experience of living; the second 'narrating the experience'. For Zygmunt, while 'the first life passes', the second, 'narrated one – lasts; and that's a ticket to eternity', as 'eternity is an extension of existence'. Like Gillian in *Mourning Becomes the Law*, he argues that death is not nothingness, since 'In every experience there is *something* … nothingness would have to be the absence of the subject.' And more than this, again like Gillian, the eternal for Zygmunt is that which is possible: 'in eternity, anything can happen…. In eternity, nothing ever ends, and nothing ever ends irrevocably.'[31]

29. Zygmunt Bauman, 'Philosophy for Everyday – Though Not for Everyone', *Economy and Society*, vol. 22, no. 1, 1993, pp. 114–22.
30. Zygmunt Bauman, *Wasted Lives: Modernity and Its Outcasts*, Polity, Cambridge, 2004, p. 97.
31. Zygmunt Bauman, *My Life in Fragments*, Polity, Cambridge, 2023, p. 10.

Eternity contains the promise of that which can live on beyond death, but for Bauman this promise can only be realized through an ethic of responsibility for the other. Nowhere is this clearer than in his book *Mortality, Immortality and Other Life Strategies* (for him, his finest work, but today rarely read), in which he declares 'Unless "I am *for*", I am not.'[32] This statement is a guiding thread that runs from the concluding sections of Bauman's 1989 *Modernity and the Holocaust*, in which he develops an outline for a sociological morality, through to his 1993 *Postmodern Ethics*, which engages in detail with the writings of Emmanuel Levinas. These texts are aligned with Levinas's position, most clearly articulated in the interviews collected in *Ethics and Infinity*, where responsibility is defined as 'responsibility for the other', and where Levinas declares that responsibility is the essential, primary structure of subjectivity.[33]

When I left Zygmunt's house that day, and looked at his living room with its old green-screen Amstrad computer, a gas fire, and piles of manuscripts stacked on the carpet, I asked him, rather naively: 'Why do you write and publish so many books?' His reply was striking: that he didn't have long left to live and time was running out for him, hence there was more to do. I realized that writing was his gift to the world, his production of culture that, for his own benefit and for the benefit of others, sought, in his words, to '*recast the horror of death into a moving force of life*'. It was his pursuit of eternity by moving beyond *being-with* to what he called *being-for* the Other.

Gillian's final lecture course and writings can be understood in the same way. The idea of eternity is a guiding thread to Gillian's final writings. It runs from start to finish of *Mourning Becomes the Law*, from the opening critique of Blanchot on the

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32. Zgymunt Bauman, *Mortality, Immortality and Other Life Strategies*, Polity, Cambridge, 1992, p. 40.
33. Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, Duquesne University Press, Pittsburgh PA, 1985, p. 95.

first page for discrediting and disregarding 'eternity', and the argument that in refusing to think death as something more than nothingness, philosophy damages if not destroys itself, through to her reading of Rilke and the declaration on the final page that death is the meeting place of 'endurance' and 'eternity'. In this work, Gillian insists that it is vital to renew 'virtue in life and death' and to 'know the violence at the heart of the human spirit' so that we can give 'death back its determination and its eternity'.[34] This is Gillian's final lesson, both to her readers and to her students: that it is vital to seek possibility in the seemingly impossible, and not to be resigned or give up hope. For, as Weber observes at the conclusion to 'Politics as a Vocation', 'man would not have attained the possible unless time and again he had reached out for the impossible', and '[o]nly he who in the face of all this can say "In spite of it all!" has the calling for politics.'[35]

Through such a vocation or *Beruf*, through the risk and *agon* of authorship and through teaching that sought to rediscover and reconsider 'virtue in life and death' by expanding and reformulating the sociological tradition to address fundamental questions of friendship, justice, law, love, power, violence and the state, Gillian could find eternity. This continued form of life, unrestrained by the limits of time, is depicted most beautifully by Rilke in his *Sonnets to Orpheus*, a book that for Gillian was a treasured companion. It is fitting to conclude, or perhaps begin, with the following lines from the *Sonnets*:

> And if all that is earthly knows you no more,
> Declare this to the still world: I flow
> And say this to the hurrying waters: I am.[36]

34. Rose, *Mourning Becomes Law*, pp. 140–41.
35. Weber, *From Max Weber*, p. 128.
36. Rainer Maria Rilke, *Sonnets to Orpheus*, Enitharmon, London, 2012, p. 125.

STYLE

3

On Gillian Rose's facetious style

ANDREW BROWER LATZ

Gillian Rose did not fully succeed in the way she hoped. Although she succeeded in some of her aims and was very influential on some, she did not transform the general intellectual culture among (let's call them) 'continental' thinkers.[1] She did not shift the intellectual mood from 'aberrated' to 'inaugurated' mourning,[2] or gain widespread acceptance of her vision of reason or philosophy.[3] A standard reason given for this is that her texts are very difficult to read.[4] I think this is true, and I want to focus on a related matter: Rose's facetious style. Although Rose's aims for her works were logically coherent, I will argue that they pull apart along their speculative and therapeutic dimensions. While her stylistic choices were clearly intentional, those of her books written in the 'facetious style' often fall between two stools:

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1. J.M. Bernstein interviewed by Michael Lazarus, 'Where is the Cross? On Gillian Rose', *Thesis Eleven* 186, 2025, ed. Michael Lazarus and Daniel Andrés López, pp. 1–17.

2. Cf. Carolin Emcke, *Weil es sagbar ist. Über Zeugenschaft und Gerechtigkeit*, Fischer, Frankfurt am Main, 2015; and the comments in Andrew Brower Latz, 'More Sayable Than you Think', *Open Letters Monthly*, 1 September 2016, www.openlettersmonthlyarchive.com/olm/more-sayable-than-you-think.

3. Maya Krishnan, 'The Risk of the Universal', *The Point Magazine*, 3 June 2024, https://thepointmag.com/politics/the-risk-of-the-universal.

4. See, for example, Robert Lucas Scott and James Gordon Finlayson, 'Editor's Introduction: Gillian Rose and the Difficulty of Critical Theory', in Gillian Rose, *Marxist Modernism: Introductory Lectures on Frankfurt School Critical Theory*, Verso, London, 2024, pp. vii–viii, citing similar views from Howard Caygill, Peter Osborne, Andrew Shanks and Jacqueline Rose. Cf. Jenny Turner, 'What Else Actually Is There?' *London Review of Books*, 46:21, 7 November 2024, www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v46/n21/jenny-turner/what-else-actually-is-there.

neither detailed enough for her speculative aims, nor narrative enough for her therapeutic aims. In saying this, I do not intend the larger claims that her facetious style never works, or that literature and philosophy must be or are completely distinct; nor do I want to make any claims about the success or otherwise of other stylish philosophers, such as Kierkegaard, Nietzsche or Adorno. Whilst I am sympathetic to the idea of using a difficult and/or literary style in philosophy, it carries a high risk of failure: it ended up limiting the reception of Rose's work.

The Melancholy Science and *Hegel Contra Sociology* are not written in the facetious style, so I will mostly ignore them (though they are in their own ways difficult).[5] Except for her final works, *Love's Work* and *Paradiso*, Rose's audience was primarily other scholars. The different 'contract' between author and reader in scholarly publications and presentations entails different conventions, demands and expectations that bear on style. Yet in many ways her popular and scholarly works are on a spectrum of stylistic devices rather than being completely different from one another, because they are animated by many of the same concerns.

In *Judaism and Modernity* Rose describes the 'facetious style' as a 'mix of severity and irony, with many facets and forms, which presents the discipline of the difficulty'.[6] This style is characterized by allusions to texts from a whole range of

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5. In *Reading Hegel: Irony, Recollection, Critique* (Chicago University Press, Chicago IL, 2025, p. 121), Robert Lucas Scott echoes his view from the Editors' Introduction to *Marxist Modernism* that *Hegel Contra Sociology* is unfairly neglected because of its dense and difficult style. Gregory Marks, in 'Substance is Subject is Style: On the Speculative Poetics of Gillan Rose' (*Thesis Eleven* 186, 2025, pp. 97–115), considers *The Melancholy Science* and *Hegel Contra Sociology* as written in the severe style and other works of Rose to be in the 'ideal style' discussed in *HCS*. Here, however, I use Rose's own term for her style from the 'Preface' to *Judaism and Modernity*.

6. Gillian Rose, *Judaism and Modernity*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1993, p. xi. Rose labels Kierkegaard's style as 'facetious' in *The Broken Middle: Out of Our Ancient Society*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1992, p. 94. Cf. *Dialectic of Nihilism: Post-Structuralism and Law*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1984, p. 178, where she describes critically self-reflective writers as 'preoccupied … with the connection with the place from which they speak and the form of their speaking' – a position she attributes to Weber and Durkheim. It is fair to say that Weber and Durkheim wrote more standard academic prose, however.

traditions; a refusal to define terms; word play and alliteration; a very condensed form of argumentation that requires a great deal of work from the reader to unpack; and close readings of texts that paradoxically require knowledge of the original texts in order to evaluate or even fully follow the readings, since they prosecute complicated arguments with the texts without much explanation of the context or aims of those texts.[7] These works are written for specialists; even so, the range of figures with whom she deals goes beyond most people's specialisms, making them a challenge to follow.

Jay Bernstein recently said there is not a single Rosean style; instead, each book has its own style that seeks to be adequate to the matter under discussion, and is a specific intervention in a debate of that moment.[8] Whilst there is truth to this view, I think the fact that Rose labels her style,[9] alongside the commonalities just mentioned, make it possible to discuss productively the facetious style at a certain level of generality.

Rose does not explicitly set out the reasons for adopting her style beyond saying her 'speculative method of engaging with the new purifications whenever they occur, in order to yield their structuring but unacknowledged third, involves deployment of the resources of reason and of its crisis, of identity and lack of identity.'[10] Nevertheless, we can extrapolate her reasons for her stylistic choices from some of her major sources. Although Rose claimed her style was largely influenced by the *Financial Times*,[11]

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7. Cf. Andrew Shanks, *Against Innocence: Gillian Rose's Reception and Gift of Faith*, SCM Press, London, 2008, p. 48.
8. Bernstein, 'Where is the Cross?'
9. As she does also in *The Broken Middle*, p. 240; cf. p. 245.
10. *Judaism and Modernity*, pp. x–xi. That sentence itself is an example of the facetious style, because to take a stab at knowing what the 'third' is, we have to look back a page or two to infer it means modern private property law based on ancient Roman law, and the separation of state and civil society in modern politics.
11. Letter to the editor of the *Financial Times* dated 20 February 1992. Rose sent them a copy of *The Broken Middle* to review because of its 'social and political argument which may be of interest to your readers. However, it also comes to you with a certain amount of gratitude and fondness – for I am aware that my style – even thought – owes much to the *FT* and its consummate use of English prose. Apart from swimming, there is nothing

it is the influence of Adorno, Kierkegaard and Hegel that are most important.[12] From Kierkegaard, Rose took, among other things, the approach of indirect communication,[13] the aim of inducing the reader to work on herself, an interest in irony and the importance of not 'arrogating authority'.[14] From Adorno, I think she took the idea of writing a type of philosophy with the aim of generating a certain experience in readers to help them encounter the world afresh; a rejection of philosophical systems; the need for philosophy not only to understand things but to respond to them (or, philosophy and writing as aspects of critical practice); that philosophy must be maximally critically self-reflexive by reflecting on its own preconditions and reception; and that philosophy is animated not only by concepts or reason but by emotions and attitudes such as love, guilt, loss and mourning. Hegel's phenomenological procedure – of bringing readers to recognize their misrecognitions in order to move them to a more comprehensive view – is often at play; and Rose was of course a speculative thinker, trying to loosen rigidified concepts and dichotomies in order to allow for different ways of thinking.

Further, it seems reasonable to infer that Rose identifies with the aims she attributes to Kierkegaard and the three women of *The Broken Middle*, chapter 5: an attempt to address each reader and call them to action in awareness of the incomplete nature of theoretical accounts of politics and action; to help them 'come to learn their own implication' and 'formation in the culture'.[15] A few pages later, we find one of the rare moments of limpid prose in the book, some from Kierkegaard and some from

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I do as regularly as read the FT.' Gillian Rose Archive, Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick, MSS.377, box 36.

12. See Marks, 'Substance is Subject is Style', and Daniel Andrés López, 'Divine Comedy in the Work of Gillian Rose', *Thesis Eleven* 186, 2025, pp. 153–69.

13. Letter to Tom and Barbara, 10 February 1995, Rose archive, box 14.

14. Rose, *The Broken Middle*, p. 213, describes the facetious style as 'the only non-legislative authorship', which shows that its irony is not equivalent to being unserious or withholding oneself from the risk of staking a position.

15. Ibid., pp. 154, 245.

Rose herself,[16] which prose we are told is merely able to '*reflect abstractly*' the matter under discussion. Rose thus deliberately eschews a transparent account in order to provoke 'attention dialectically'. She seems to affirm Goethe's 'therapeutic facetious-ness' that brings 'into representation ... the paradox' of the changes and reversals of emerging social forms.[17]

Rose sought to weave together style and subject matter, so the former cannot be assessed without a sense of the latter.[18] Each of her books obviously had its own aims and tasks, but I think there are nine common aims that run through them all from *Dialectic of Nihilism* onwards. She wanted

1. To show that 'the most existential moment of ethical suspen-sion is the most consistent witnessing of the history of ethical and political authority.'[19]
2. To interpret Hegel and Kierkegaard as both simultaneously conceptual and existential, or, put otherwise, to show that 'repetition and critical reconstruction are not incompatible'.[20]
3. To show 'that it is possible to have faith and knowledge and politics in a way that does not require dogmatic reason or lead to existential scepticism or despair'.[21]
4. To 'restore [our awareness of] the political history of ethical life'[22] – especially the changing diremption between law and ethics, and between state and civil society – in order to allow us a greater freedom with respect to what shapes us.

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16. Ibid., pp. 163 and 164 respectively.
17. Ibid., pp. 153, 195. Cf. the description of Weber's 'facetiousness' in ibid., p. 177, and Luxemburg's in ibid., pp. 206, 210–213.
18. López, 'Divine Comedy in the Work of Gillian Rose'; Marks, 'Substance is Subject is Style'.
19. *The Broken Middle*, p. 39.
20. Letter to Robert Jan van Pelt, 14 August 1992, Rose archive, box 16, about *The Broken Middle*.
21. Ibid.
22. Rose, *The Broken Middle*, p. 152.

5. To help us to accept our complicity in the necessities of legitimate violence, and thereby be willing to risk action for the universal interest.[23]

6. To shift the prevailing attitude among certain thinkers about reason and philosophy, from aberrated to inaugurated mourning.[24]

7. To persuade us of a different reading of the post-Kantian European philosophical tradition as concerned with 'the dilemma of addressing modern ethics and politics without arrogating the authority under question'.[25]

8. To offer a speculative and aporetic reading of philosophy and philosophers, of reason and of social and political life.[26]

9. To retrieve the concepts of recognition and appropriation for social theory, on the understanding that appropriation is akin to Kierkegaard's view that we must take on board the truth in order to become a 'single individual' or a proper self.[27]

As is clear from these aims, Rose set herself a complex task. She is not merely trying to change her readers' opinions, but to prompt them to work on themselves, to reassess their views and values in light of political and intellectual history; a therapeutic process of existential self-work that will gird them for the risk of political and/or moral action.[28] This is one of the ways in which much of her work is meta-philosophical. It is simultaneously about philosophical theories and the unrecognized attitudes driving the thinking of the theorists. Rose pursues, in the

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23. Rose, *Judaism and Modernity*, pp. 1–10; Gillian Rose, *Mourning Becomes the Law: Philosophy and Representation*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1996, pp. 1–14.

24. Rose, *Mourning Becomes the Law*, p. 70.

25. Rose, *Hegel Contra Sociology*, 'Preface' for the 1995 Verso reprint, p. viii.

26. Rose, *Love's Work: A Reckoning with Life,* Chatto & Windus, London, 1995, pp. 124 ff; *Judaism and Modernity*, pp. xi, 2–5.

27. Rose, *Hegel Contra Sociology*, p. 45.

28. I take this to be the primary meaning of Rose's phrase 'arrogating authority', since in modernity each person must assess not only the reasons for their views but the reason for accepting those reasons too. Cf. Tom Bunyard, 'Tragic Landscapes: T.J. Clark and Gillian Rose on Modernity and the Future', *Thesis Eleven* 186, 2005, pp. 116–36.

words of Maya Krishnan, 'an almost psychoanalytic strategy to show how fantasies of safety and security distort philosophical thinking'.[29] She regarded many postmodern thinkers as (Krishnan again) throwing 'a kind of tantrum in which thinkers misdirect their anger over an irrational society by lashing out at rationality itself'.[30] As Hegel remarks in the *Encyclopaedia Logic*: some philosophers are like adolescents, thinking everything is bad; some are like believers in Providence, accepting the status quo too easily.[31] His own position is like an adult negotiating limits and imperfections in order to improve things. In so far as Rose wants to urge certain thinkers to grow up[32] (whether fairly or not), she has to bring them to this realization for themselves. She tries to do this through detailed readings of their texts, trying to show their reliance on factors they have missed, which is meant to induce both a more comprehensive view (the speculative dimension) and a change in attitude (the therapeutic dimension). My guess is the attempt to shift attitudes is one of the reasons for the poetic, allusive nature of the facetious style.[33] My feeling, however, is that, in many instances, the speculative and therapeutic dimensions end up working against one another.

To simplify somewhat, when Rose discusses speculative philosophy, she often concentrates on two things: first, understanding the political history that shapes ethical life and the current diremptions that shape contemporary theory, especially

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29. Krishnan, 'The Risk of the Universal'.
30. Ibid. Cf. the Introduction to *Mourning Becomes the Law*; and Jenny Turner, 'What Else Actually is There?'
31. G.W.F. Hegel, *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences in Basic Outline*, Part I: *Science of Logic*, trans. and ed. Klaus Brinkmann and Daniel O. Dahlstrom, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2010, §234 Addition.
32. Cf. Alistair J Smith and Gerald Midgley, 'Accommodation and Critique: A Necessary Tension', *Systems Research and Behavioural Science* 42, 2025, pp.23–50.
33. López, 'Divine Comedy in the Work of Gillian Rose', suggests Rose sought to affirm an 'aesthetic dimension to speculative experience' that 'combines philosophy and poetry' (pp. 167–8). As Bartholomew Ryan remarked after the presentation of this paper, the different forms, the engagement of emotions and the sense of failing into oneself are all taken from Kierkegaard as goads to philosophical living, to working on oneself.

those that are undertheorized and/or overlooked;[34] second, coming to a more comprehensive view of a topic or theory or oneself – or all three.[35] The two are often synthesized in Rose's language of 'converging on a third'. In the chapter in *Judaism and Modernity* on speculative and dialectical thinking, Rose argues that Nietzsche can be seen as a speculative thinker on the grounds that he, like Hegel, historicizes philosophy; narrates the emergence of morality in relation to legal concepts; sees both the 'enabling and constricting' components of the current legal epoch; is ironic about knowledge; and aims to educate the reader, to facilitate *Bildung*. They both thereby encourage the reader's self-work in light of the political history of ethical life. In the same chapter she claims that Lukács has a speculative exposition of capitalism as a social structure because he treats the commodity as a way in to seeing the whole, the totality and its mediations.[36] Indeed, she uses the word 'comprehensive' almost as a synonym for speculative thought.[37]

Clearly, then, Hegel is not the only speculative thinker, and we can find speculative moments even in thinkers who are not consistently speculative. Equally, this shows that we do not necessarily have to go through a phenomenological series of conceptual breakdowns in order to arrive at a speculative view. That may have been necessary when Hegel published his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, but in a post-Hegelian age in which sociology is an established discipline, the need for a comprehensive view to refer to social and political contexts and their histories

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34. Rose, *Hegel Contra Sociology*, p. 223: the 'overall intention of Hegel's thought is to make a different ethical life possible by providing insight into the displacement of actuality in those dominant philosophies which are assimilated to and reinforce bourgeois law and bourgeois property relations.' Cf. the introduction and first two chapters of *Judaism and Modernity*.

35. Rose, *Judaism and Modernity*, ch. 6. This can occur through speculative experience, which a phenomenology can provide. Cf. *Hegel Contra Sociology*, pp. 48–50.

36. Cf. *Hegel Contra Sociology*, p. 232, on commodity fetishism as Marx's most speculative moment because it shows the necessary illusions of subject and substance.

37. Cf. ibid., p. 49: 'This "whole" can only become known as a result of the process of the contradictory experiences of consciousness which gradually comes to realize it.'

is not in dispute. *How precisely* that occurs is what matters and where the power of an argument resides: Rose quotes Hegel's line, 'everything depends on how they are determined'.[38] Yet most of Rose's own work lacks this detailed exposition about society and politics.[39] Perhaps this is partly down to the fact that she saw a continuity in her works, and in *Hegel Contra Sociology* she had relied on Hegel's reading of history – especially the shift from Greece to Rome as the introduction of private property law and then persons and subjectivity and representation, followed by the fates of Christianity and the Reformation, Enlightenment and Romanticism. The importance of Roman law for Western philosophy recurs throughout her work, as do the diremptions between law and ethics and state and civil society. Yet indispensable as these historical layers and structural features of society are, how they are construed and configured in detail matters, for at least three reasons.

The first is that what sounds plausible initially can turn out, on closer inspection, not to be the case, as I think happens with Rose's argument that Kant's philosophy depends *essentially* on the categories of Roman law.[40]

The second reason is the attempt in speculative philosophy to interweave the history of philosophy and the philosophy of history makes philosophical arguments vulnerable to changes in historical and/or sociological accounts.[41] For instance, Rose characterizes contemporary society as evincing the 'inner anxiety and outer ruthlessness' of Weber's Protestants, and the 'individual inwardness inverted into the ruthlessness of social

38. Ibid., p. 119.
39. This is true even when Rose is being straightforwardly explicit about the ethics/law diremption causing failures in theorizing; for example, in *Judaism and Modernity*, p. 21, where the claim is asserted rather than argued. Reference is made to classical sociology and Weber but no argument is provided.
40. Andrew Brower Latz, 'Ideology Critique via Jurisprudence: Against Rose's Critique of Roman Law in Kant', *Thesis Eleven* 133, 2016, pp. 80–95.
41. Rose, *Dialectic of Nihilism*, p. 3, notes Hegel 'suspends the history of philosophy within the philosophy of history, and the philosophy of history within the history of philosophy'.

institutions' of Hegel's spiritual-animal kingdom – and no doubt
there is truth there.[42] But to take only one recent example, Joseph
Henrich's research shows that

> WEIRD [Western, educated, industrialized, rich, democratic]
> people from market-based societies tend to have the fairest, most
> cooperative, most trustworthy and least selfish behaviour of all,
> acting less purely in their own self-interest than one might expect.
> The more a society becomes structured towards a market economy
> … the more generous the offers that people made, on average, in
> behavioural economic experiments.[43]

Partly because

> [o]nly with relative economic security and political stability could
> the emancipatory values of equality, inclusion and freedom –
> those values so closely associated with moral progress – assert
> themselves.[44]

This is not to say Henrich is right or even that we must choose
between these accounts; rather it is to highlight the importance
of the detail which alone can help us navigate what Rose wants
to – the way through the aporia and changing shape of the
diremptions.

   This relates to the question of how we know something is
wrong. Martin Jay remarks that it could be difficult to have
productive dialogue with Rose, partly due to her 'fondness for
gnomic *pronunciamentos*, and hedgehog-like ability to incorporate
every possible position into her own worldview'.[45] The former is
one characteristic of her prose – even if the refusal to define her
terms was a conscious inheritance from Nietzsche and Adorno.
Perhaps the latter was a reason she didn't feel she needed to argue
in too much detail – perhaps she thought the detail was included

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42. Rose, *Judaism and Modernity*, p. 68; *The Broken Middle*, p. 164.
43. Hanno Sauer, *The Invention of Good and Evil: A World History of Morality,* trans. Jo
Henrich, Profile Books, London, 2024, p. 209.
44. Ibid., p. 243.
45. Martin Jay, 'The Conversion of the Rose', *Salmagundi* 113, 1997, pp. 41–52.

in her views anyway.[46] I don't mean this in an *ad hominem* way; only to argue that speculative comprehension requires a type of detail that seems to be lacking in her works. She often tells us what to do more than she shows us how to do it.[47]

The third reason we need detail for speculative philosophy is that, if we want a 'determinate negation'[48] of what's wrong or distorted in current ethical life and theory, in order to advance to a more comprehensive view without imposing a *Sollen*, we need enough detail about what is going wrong to see where the negation leads. Exemplary here, in my opinion, is Jay Bernstein in both *Torture and Dignity* and *Adorno: Disenchantment and Ethics*. If we take the latter as an example, Bernstein offers a detailed account of ethical life's current situation and possibilities, based on a careful reading of its status as disenchanted. Bernstein called this 'dry speculative' philosophy,[49] probably because of its detail and clarity in spelling out its argumentative steps. The 'predicament of ethical life', for Bernstein, is 'a consequence of the overlap and convergence of the domination of scientific rationality in intellectual life and ... the bureaucratic rationalization of practical life in the context of indefinite economic (capital) expansion'.[50] To make this case, Bernstein pursues simultaneously sociological and philosophical readings of European history, in order to show *how exactly* theoretical reason has become sceptical and practical reason has become

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46. Although Bernstein, 'Where is the Cross?' (p. 12), suggests perhaps Rose had more principled objections to certain types of detail.

47. For example, *The Broken Middle*, pp. 169 and 217. In the former, she criticizes Booth and Nygren for 'abolishing the ethical', but doesn't show us what it would mean instead to be 'simultaneously suspending and releasing it'. In the latter, she criticizes Arendt for failing to suspend the ethical but Rose doesn't herself 'explore this diremption in the experience of the individual' – which is what suspending the ethical is supposed to allow us to do. Cf. Michael Lazarus, 'The Legacy of Reification: Gillian Rose and the Value-form Theory Challenge to Georg Lukács' (*Thesis Eleven* 157, 2020, pp. 80–96; 88), who points out that Rose identifies a problem in Marxism's use of Marx's theory of value without then providing a 'substantial positive account' to make good on the failure.

48. Rose, *The Broken Middle*, p. 228.

49. Bernstein, 'Where is the Cross?'

50. J.M. Bernstein, *Adorno: Disenchantment and Ethics,* Cambridge University, Cambridge, 2001, p. 3.

instrumental. It is this depth and level of argumentation that make persuasive his argument against Kant's moral philosophy on the basis that 'each of its fundamental gestures can be interpreted as both a *response* to the disenchantment of nature and the rationalization of reason, and, at the same time and despite itself, a further work of disenchanting and rationalizing.'[51] This in turn allows an argument about how we should think morally now. This seems to me a paradigm of 'suspending the ethical' in order to bring in the plasticity of speculative thought, but it only works via the detailed interleaving of sociology, political history and philosophy.

Where Rose does have more detail, it is focused on theory rather than society. Rose thought of *Dialectic of Nihilism* and *The Broken Middle* as providing detailed arguments about the breakdown of conceiving law and ethics in much philosophy and social thought.[52] And, of course, analysing social theory is one way of analysing society, since the theories conceptualize society. But *Dialectic of Nihilism* is an argument that various thinkers misconceive ethics because they ignore law, or use legal categories uncritically, and it does not include much detail about the nature of society beyond the broad claim about the diremption of law and ethics. And, as Jay Bernstein puts it, *The Broken Middle* is a 'phenomenology of modern theory that works *within* the dialectic of ethical life rather than being about it'.[53] Once again, the focus is on theory more than society, which again feels as if it tells us what we ought to do without showing us how it can be done. In neither case is there the sort of detailed reading of society and politics that would enable Rose to show us how to suspend the ethical.

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51. Ibid., p. 36.
52. Rose, *Judaism and Modernity*, p. 26.
53. J.M. Bernstein, *Recovering Ethical Life: Jürgen Habermas and the Future of Critical Theory*, Routledge, London, 1999, p. 185.

Bernstein's 'dry speculative' arguments show us fundamental aspects of the political history of our ethical life, but, in contrast to Rose, he leaves what we do with it up to us, rather than seeking to induce a specific existential response from the reader. Bernstein offers what he calls 'an argumentative reconstruction' of Adorno in a 'form that enables its fuller appreciation and ideally its further extension and elaboration'.[54] This is now a standard procedure among Adorno scholars (for example, Brian O'Connor, James Finlayson, Martin Shuster, Owen Hulatt) – reconstructing and spelling out his arguments in analytic ways – which suggests not merely that most people cannot write like Adorno, but that there's something incomplete about such work: it actually needs to be reconstructed in a different format in order to be assessed and accepted. That in turn implies that most people are able to absorb the implications, both personal and general, when philosophy and literary elements are separated a little more clearly.

This, I suspect, is the reason *Love's Work* is one of Rose's most successful books – 'successful' not merely in the sense of having been more widely read, but in achieving her aims of having readers work on themselves and rethink what philosophy and reason are: because it employs narratives. Research across pedagogy, neuroscience, evolution and politics shows the multiple ways in which humans respond to narratives, but this seems to work by encountering the narrative itself, with discussion and clarification of the narrative as a separate step. This is the sort of procedure one finds in Martha Nussbaum's *Love's Knowledge*. Nussbaum argues there are ways of making sense and understanding that are best done and *only* done in narrative, but the philosophical discussion of such narratives can help draw out and cement the sense-making of experiencing the narrative.

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54. Bernstein, *Adorno: Disenchantment and Ethics*, p. 39.

As Nussbaum puts it, the head and heart need one another as allies.[55]

Rose herself links the facetious style and narrative in *The Broken Middle*:

> 'Fictions', theoretical and literal, are themselves facetious forms which configure the double danger as it changes historically: *aporia* of the universal and *agape* of the singular.... Fiction and facetiousness maintain this tension, this aporia of the universal, and prevent it, even when personified and characterised, from succumbing to the contrary danger: from representing the agape of the singular, the inwardly piteous, outwardly pitiless individual, or the clockwork love-community set in an authoritarian locality.... Facetious form not 'grand narrative' sustains this double agon of authorship, which seeks to examine authority without arrogating it, to suspend the ethical and not abolish it.[56]

Love's Work is probably also Rose's most therapeutically successful book,[57] not only because it uses narratives but because it doesn't employ too much technical detail. And this is important because it reveals another place where it is very easy for the detail needed for speculative philosophy and the emotional charge needed for the therapeutic to oppose one another. David Foster Wallace was interested in writing the type of fiction that had the capacity 'for making heads throb heartlike', of combining 'cerebration & emotion, abstraction & lived life'; but, equally, he thought novels of ideas are 'pretty dreadful' when they become too similar to the clarificatory style of philosophy, because the technical exposition of ideas weighs down and hinders the narrative drive and living quality of the characters.[58] Randy Ramal labels the combination of philosophical ideas,

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55. Martha Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1990, p. 283.
56. Rose, *The Broken Middle*, p. 164; cf. pp. 14–15.
57. Cf. 'Love's Work: James Butler, Rebekah Howes, Rowan Williams', 10 April 2024, www.londonreviewbookshop.co.uk/podcasts-video/podcasts/love-s-work-james-butler-rebekah-howes-rowan-williams.
58. David Foster Wallace, 'The Empty Plenum: David Markson's *Wittgenstein's Mistress*' in *Both Flesh and Not,* Little, Brown, London, 2012, p. 46.

STYLE   59

existential challenge and therapeutic possibilities in Wallace's work 'narrative philosophy'[59] – whether that be his fiction or his creative non-fiction such as 'Consider the Lobster' or 'This is Water'. The reception of Wallace's work suggests it was more successful along the existential or therapeutic dimension than Rose's, partly because it more successfully balances narrative and detail, and it does this precisely by not having the level of detail we require from expository or clarificatory philosophy.

My invocation of Wallace is not arbitrary. He and Rose shared many preoccupations: the importance of irony and the danger of its tendency to degenerate into despair and nihilism; the tightrope of connecting with, versus manipulating, readers; the importance of and problems with 'the post-structural problema-tization of language and representation';[60] wanting to use philo-sophical ideas to encourage therapeutic or existential work by the reader; and the importance of taking the risk to stake oneself in moral commitment.[61] Jon Baskin even thinks Wallace helps us discern the tendency of 'artists and intellectuals [to] cycle so reliably between utopian evangelism and ironic anti-politics', which is close to Rose's diagnosis of the double danger of evading the broken middle.

Another similarity between the two is their anticipation of their works' reception. Rose anticipated her works' reception by deliberately making them difficult,[62] and Wallace thematized the problem of the reception of his works, the tensions between honesty and manipulation, between being liked and moral communication. Wallace's fiction dramatizes the reception

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59. Randy Ramal, 'Beyond Philosophy: David Foster Wallace on Literature, Wittgenstein, and the Dangers of Theorizing', in Robert K. Bolger and Scott Korb, eds, *Gesturing Toward Reality: David Foster Wallace and Philosophy,* Bloomsbury, London, 2014, pp. 177–98.
60. Robert L. McLaughlin, 'Wallace's Aesthetic', in Ralph Clare, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to David Foster Wallace*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2018, pp. 159–60.
61. Jon Baskin, 'David Foster Wallace's Final Attempt to Make Art Moral', *The New Yorker*; accessed 10 February 2025.
62. Bernstein, 'Where is the Cross?'

problem through many characters who 'manipulate the condi-
tions of their own reception by seeming to level with the reader
[or other characters] about their skill at manipulation'.[63] This
problem is perhaps most intensely expressed in the story 'Octet'.
It is impossible to decide from 'Octet' considered in isolation
whether Wallace is playing a metafictional game with readers
or genuinely trying to communicate something to them. 'Octet'
draws the reader into an infinite regress or recursion.[64] For
Wallace, there was no way to forget or ignore the difficulties of
irony in postmodern fiction; he had to seek a way through them.
Yet even Wallace began to look for other, simpler ways of con-
necting with the reader, worrying that his style had degenerated
into a tic.[65] We can read the Chris Fogle sections of *The Pale King*
in this way, although they are only one part of a text containing
metafictional techniques, so Wallace by no means abandons his
commitment to working through the difficulties of the literary
tradition. Nevertheless, the contrast with Wallace shows the
risk that difficult styles run, almost to the point of being self-
defeating, and it is suggestive that both writers' late styles are
more lucid, even if much of this might be down to a change in
personal circumstances.

What objections might there be to the view I've outlined
here? One is Rose's view that if the intellectual and therapeutic,
like style and substance, are inseparable, then the difficulty of
the texts is not a sign of the speculative and therapeutic pulling
apart, but is intrinsic to their functioning. One response to this
objection is that the texts are so hard to read they start to lose

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63. Lee Konstantinou, 'Wallace's "Bad" Influence', in *The Cambridge Companion to David Foster Wallace*, p. 51. For instance, Orin Incandenza in *Infinite Jest*.

64. Cf. Rose, *The Broken Middle*, pp. 27–8: 'Since the *Phenomenology of Spirit* is historical, genealogical and futural, once the flight into thought has occurred the conflict can never be unmediated again. The "secret" of the *Phenomenology* ... lies in the challenge of expounding its own flights into thought – thereby risking further flight, yet taking that risk for the sake of provoking instead renewed negotiation of thought and its others – "the world".'

65. D.T. Max, *Every Love Story is a Ghost Story: A Life of David Foster Wallace*, Granta, London, 2012, p. 281.

their therapeutic function, because more energy is expended on trying to understand the text than on appropriating it in a therapeutic manner.[66] Another response is that subject matter can be to some extent distinct from style – otherwise nobody could talk about the same subject matter. And if part of the purpose is to communicate ideas, there has to be some precision about that as well – literature often asks questions and provokes reflection, but it rarely puts forward a *precise* thesis – which is not to say all philosophy has to do so, but, as we've seen, it must do so at points.

Perhaps Rose was worried that providing a comprehensive speculative tome would freeze the movement or plasticity essential to speculative thought.[67] She advocates an 'unsettled and unsettling approach, which is not a "position" because it will not *posit* anything, and refuses any beginning or end', which can nevertheless 'induce repetition forwards'.[68] But there has to be something to unsettle; there has to be a positive position for speculative thought to loosen from its rigidity; there has to be somewhere from where one can risk action.[69] Rose should accept this, for she says, 'Philosophy issues, too, out of this diremption and its provisional overcoming in the culture of an era – without "disowning" that "edifice", it (philosophy) steps away to inspect its limitations.'[70] Another response to this worry is that the work makes sense and has the necessary detail so long as one knows or has read the works under discussion, which may in some

66. Stephen Howe, 'Pardon?', *New Statesman & Society*, 28 February 1992, p. 46.

67. Cf. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, §60–65, where Hegel speaks of the need to show the movement of thought and warns against mixing up 'the speculative with the ratiocinative methods' because it is necessary to exclude the normal way of thinking in order to grasp the speculative/properly philosophical way of thinking to 'achieve the goal of plasticity'. We may ask, however, whether Rose's situation is different from Hegel first introducing speculative thought in the *Phenomenology* ahead of its more rigorous exposition in the *Logic*, given two subsequent centuries of speculative thought.

68. Rose, *The Broken Middle*, p. 155.

69. Cf. Brian O'Connor, *Adorno*, Routledge, London, 2013, p. 22, and Rachel Pafe, 'Aporetic Marxism', *Radical Philosophy* 2:18, Spring 2025, p. 66.

70. Rose, *The Broken Middle*, p. 286.

cases be true.[71] But it seems a least a tactical error to assume readers will be familiar with the whole range of writings under discussion, and it still leaves the question of why there is not a more up-to-date example, and/or why Rose does not herself show us how to do it.

Perhaps these replies assume too much and we can press the objection again: the difficulty is intrinsic and necessary. For one thing, difficulty is only a tactical error if the aim is to be widely read. Isn't criticizing Rose for writing difficult texts analogous to asking T.S. Eliot to write more straightforwardly? For another, struggling through a text can itself enhance experience, even if it can be difficult to articulate precisely what one gains from it.[72] This could defeat my argument if one reads the objection as seeing my argument as misdirected by asking Rose to do something different from what she set out to do. But my argument is not that Rose should have written in an analytic style rather than the facetious style, but that for the purposes of her own aims the balance of her style tips too far towards the obscure. That is, the texts are more difficult and obscure than they need to be, even accepting the necessity of difficulty, and precisely thereby undermine their own aims.

Perhaps showing us how to suspend the ethical (and so on) would arrogate authority when a main purpose of Rose's writings is to have the reader live philosophically by deciding for themselves how to go about navigating the broken middle.[73] In some sense this is true, but Rose does seek to offer some examples in *The Broken Middle* and in *Love's Work*, so it cannot be the whole truth; and again the problem is being *too* obscure. Bernstein wrote in the reader's report for *The Broken Middle* that the book works within the dialectic of ethical life rather than being about

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71. Michael Lazarus, 'Economy and State: The Politics of Citizenship and Universality in Gillian Rose, Hannah Arendt and Rosa Luxemburg', *Thesis Eleven* 186, 2025, pp. 1–11.
72. These are both points made by Robert Lucas Scott in response to this paper.
73. As Bartholomew Ryan suggested after the presentation of this paper.

it, which in Rose's terms would be to say it is not an abstract reflection on the dialectic of ethical life but an attempt to reveal it at work or playing out; though she does this in theories more than in people's lives or social or political movements. This is a perfectly valid thing to do, but the feeling gradually accrues that we are being repeatedly told what to do (or, more often, what not to do) rather than being shown how it could be done. The three women of chapter 5 of *The Broken Middle* are meant to be largely positive examples of suspending the ethical and remaining with the anxiety of beginning and awareness of double danger, but to what does this amount? Admittedly an interesting way of reading the oeuvre of each, but in substance it seems to be largely a matter of (1) being aware that concepts and distinctions have a history and therefore should not be used unreflectively (this seems to be Rose's pejorative use of 'judging') – yet we still have to be able to use concepts in order to stake a position and risk action; (2) exploring changing diremptions – though for that we would need detailed examination of society and politics, which Varnhagen, Luxemburg and Arendt do more than Rose; (3) accepting the imperfections of politics and working with what is to hand, without turning to spurious use of universals or the immediacy of community. But do we really need the elaborate apparatus for this? Phrases like 'equivocation of the ethical' are neat slogans for capturing a kind of theoretical know-how, but by the end one has a reservation well put by John Milbank's remarks on *The Broken Middle*,[74] that Rose risks a 'dialectic without issue', which is very close to the Derridean deconstruction she spurned. The emphasis on the implied totality, broken though it is, does not really come through. And this means there is little said about actual praxis rather than theoretical know-how. Yet why cannot practical solutions be seen as a speculative move of reaching for a

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74. MSS 377/box 36, 5 April 1991, 'On The Broken Middle: A Commentary in the Severe Style'.

version of the totality? Zygmunt Bauman felt the book conflates authorship and actorship, making writing and the intellectual into the paradigm of action, despite its intentions.[75]

A different problem for my account is that narrative is not the only mode of the therapeutic; poetry or aphorism can serve a similar function – and we do find those modes in Rose's writing, so it's worth repeating that I think she does sometimes succeed in her aims. But what Rose calls the 'drama' and 'comedy' of misrecognition in a phenomenology do have a narrative dimension – and it is this that I think is sometimes lacking.

Another objection can be expressed in the words of Gregory Marks:

> Speculative thought is not given in a statement, but must be drawn out by interpretative practices that do not prejudge the object of the severe style or presuppose a unity of the object given ironically.... Indeed, throughout Rose's works it is the process of misrecognition that informs her thinking on style and may best serve as the principle for her poetics of philosophical writing.[76]

Certainly this is an important way of getting to speculative thought, and one that Rose in some ways seeks to achieve. But, as I noted earlier, Rose herself identifies other ways of presenting speculative thought to readers, so perhaps this objection conflates phenomenology as a method and speculative thinking as an outcome.

At this point in history, do *all* speculative works have to have a phenomenological propaedeutic?

75. Zygmunt Bauman, 'Philosophy for Everyday – But Not for Everyone', *Economy and Society*, vol. 22 no. 1, 1993, pp. 114–122.

76. Marks, 'Substance is Subject is Style', p. 105; cf. López, 'Divine Comedy', p. 154 (though López is really talking only about *Love's Work*, which is somewhat different from the facetious style of earlier works by being easier to understand and less specialized). Scott, *Reading Hegel*, p. xix, argues one *must* misread a speculative proposition before one can read it properly. See also Lazarus, 'The Legacy of Reification'.

4

Voice and register: composing from *Love's Work*

ED COOPER

One of the striking elements about *Love's Work* is how Gillian Rose moves abruptly yet fluidly between registers of expression. The text amalgamates confession-like passages that detail her own intimacies and quietudes alongside sentences that are far more removed, flirting with the aphoristic. An example of this can be found in chapter 5:

> Hands no longer marvel at the beauty of hands: they cease to stroke, slowly, repeatedly, the long, speechful fingers; her hands can no longer reach their short, maladroit, childlike friends. Palm no longer paddles in palm, kissing with inside lip.
>
> Lips still meet lips, full enough for breach of promise, unlike the lipless organs of politicians. Lip no longer sucks in lip, tongue roving around the songlines, greeting whorl upon whorl of inner ear. The embrace of face by face is the true carnival of sex beyond gender.
>
> He no longer calls my name. (He no longer even uses my name.)
>
> 'Loss' is a loose description. The movement from eros passion through the passion of faith to the everyday and the ethical, enhanced when together and, equally, when apart, is missing. In place of the unselfconsciousness of mutual love, its berth of listening stillness, a hateful self-regard is unleashed to gnaw the Beloved, the disappointed one.
>
> Loss is legion. If the Lover finds the entanglement of love too harrowing, then, as it pulls back, his harrow crushes the Beloved, also caught in its path. Lover and Beloved are equally at the mercy of emotions which each fears will overwhelm and destroy their

singularity. For the Lover, these are the frightening feelings roused by the love: for the Beloved, these are the frightening feelings trusted to love, but now sent back against her. Patient, she is now doubly violent agent: against his desire and against her desire returned. He covers his eyes with index finger and thumb and says, 'This is not my story.'[1]

In this passage Rose oscillates between bodily sensuality, philosophical reflection and political critique, constructing a sort of polyphony. The passage begins in a sensory register, where hands, lips, and tongue function as extensions of speech through touch. The phrase 'long, speechful fingers' illustrates the collapse of corporeal communication, an erosion of physical intimacy as a form of expressive language. Rose foregrounds the sensory organs as vehicles of discourse, turning touch into a mode of articulation.

This tactile voice then merges with a political critique, contrasting the lips of lovers: 'full enough for breach of promise' with 'lipless organs of politicians'. The association of political figures with an absence of lips signals a failure of embodied truth, positioning public rhetoric as devoid of the sincerity that intimacy demands. In this juxtaposition, Rose extends the voice of Eros into a broader critique of political insincerity and betrayal.

Moving beyond the immediate experience of loss, Rose enters an existential register, reflecting on the transformation of love's intensity into an ethical condition. The passage's exploration of 'the movement from eros passion through the passion of faith to the everyday and the ethical' suggests that love transcends the realm of personal attachment, morphing into a commitment to an ethical way of being. Here, love is not merely an individual experience but a force that carries ethical weight.

The voice fractures further in the latter half. When Rose writes 'He no longer calls my name. (He no longer even uses

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1. Gillian Rose, *Love's Work*, Chatto & Windus, London, 1995, pp. 67–8.

my name.)' the parenthetical aside performs an act of doubling, indicating a split between internal awareness and external absence. This fragmentation intensifies in the final moment, when the lover denies participation in the narrative by stating 'This is not my story.' The erasure of agency disrupts the coherence of the account.

In these five short paragraphs voices emerge, dissolve and return as echoes, tracing the instability of relational experience through shifting registers of speech. Perhaps, then, it is through such interplays of voice that capabilities of love are articulated, whilst, simultaneously, these tensions express the labour that love requires. In any case, through adopting such rhetoric, Rose's voice and its sentiments appear as resonance between that which is intimate and that which is removed.

Such observations resound within and might be articulated further by Jean-Luc Nancy, even if Rose herself infamously expressed a disdain for poststructuralism.[2] Nancy writes:

> [Voice] is formed by a gap, by an opening, a tube, a larynx, throat, and mouth, traversed by this nothing, by this utterance, by this expulsion of voice. The voice cries in the wilderness because it is itself initially such a wilderness extending through the very centre of the body, beyond words.[3]

For Nancy, there is paradox and tension inherent to voice: it is both an expulsion and an absence, that which is material and bodily, and that which is alterative and alternative to these limitations. Voice reveals the body's interiority whilst simultaneously exceeding it. Voice is a sort of resonance amongst its self, perhaps even a resonance between its own voices. Such concerns of the aural recall Nancy's writings on listening, which contribute to this reading of register, space and interplay:

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2. The most sustained critique of poststructuralism can be found in Gillian Rose, *Dialectic of Nihilism: Post-Structuralism and Law*, Wiley-Blackwell, Hoboken NJ, 1991.
3. Jean-Luc Nancy, 'Vox Clamans in Deserto', in *The Birth to Presence*, trans. Brian Holmes et al., Stanford University Press, Stanford CA, 1993, pp. 234–47; p. 23.

> To listen is to enter that spatiality by which, *at the same time*, I am penetrated, for it opens up in me as well as around me, and from me as well as toward me: it opens me inside me as well as outside, and it is through such a double, quadruple, or sextuple opening that a 'self' can take place. To be listening is to be *at the same time* outside and inside, to be open *from* without and *from* within, hence from one to the other and from one in the other. Listening thus forms the perceptible singularity that bears in the most ostensive way the perceptible or sensitive (*aisthetic*) condition as such: the sharing of an inside/outside, division and participation, de-connection and contagion.[4]

If voice is structured by absence, listening is what renders that absence relational, creating a spatiality in which both the listener and sound are mutually implicated (if a meaningful distinction can be made between the two). Nancy presents listening as a condition that exists simultaneously inside and outside, dissolving boundaries between self and world. He emphasizes that listening is not passive reception but a participatory event that both fragments and connects, creating a space for selfhood through this act of openness.

Taken together, these passages suggest a relationship between voice and listening: voice emerges through absence, while listening transforms that absence into a shared spatiality. In Nancy's formulation, listening is not simply hearing sound but engaging in a process of division and participation where the self is constituted through an interplay of interiority and exteriority. The wilderness of voice, which stretches beyond words, is met by the spatiality of listening, which does not merely take in sound but actively reshapes the conditions through which presence and absence interact. Or – in plain terms, and to return to Rose – the extract of *Love's Work* might be read as an enactment of the doubled space of listening, where names fade, voices break and physical intimacy is rendered speechless.

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4. Jean-Luc Nancy, *Listening*, trans. Charlotte Mandell, Fordham University Press, Fordham NY, 2007, p. 14.

I was invited to think through these observations on Rose's text when singer Lotte Betts-Dean asked me to compose a piece for mezzo-soprano and electronics as part of her *Voice Electric* project. My aim was not to somehow represent Rose's mode of expression, nor Nancy's interpretations of the voice and listening, but rather to consider how registers within a written voice interplay with an outer, externalized voice, treating these relationships themselves as musical material for composition.

Live and electronic voices

The piece consists of a live performance alongside pre-recorded audio. The live part utilizes only the first three of the five paragraphs quoted earlier from *Love's Work*. The majority of this part is built upon three simple, plaintive, narrow melodies, marked as M1, M2 and M3. Over the course of the seven-minute piece, I freely manipulate them, fragmenting, reshaping and playing with their form. This sense of looseness and instability is reinforced by the absence of a time signature and strict tempo marking. Additionally, I invite the singer to sporadically add ornamentations, such as trills and turns, at their discretion. The effect, I hope, is a music that feels constrained yet continuously toys with its own boundaries, suggesting but never committing to a forward motion. Such an arrangement and treatment of pitches and rhythms grounds the differing registers of Rose's text. To my ears, there is an interplay, even an implicit tension, in a text comprising leaps of vocal register being ambiguously contained by its performance.

The fragmented momentum of these three melodies is interjected with something of a refrain, the passage highlighted with a solid line, and the title of the composition, *They no longer call my name. (They no longer even use my name.).* This material provides a disruption to the quasi-hypnosis. The passage sits in

Score with melodic annotations

a slightly lower yet distinctly noticeable register for a mezzo-
soprano voice. It also departs from the fluid rhythms of the sur-
rounding material by introducing a tempo marking and shorter
note values. The disturbance is subtle, insufficient to break the
coherence of the vocal line, but, to my ears, pronounced enough
to stand out. I chose to change the pronouns from 'he' to 'they'
to underscore the ambiguity of voices outlined in my reading
of Rose's text: in this context, 'they' might refer to a singular
individual, a group, or perhaps even different registers of one's
own voice (or self, even).

The pre-recorded material comprises multiple overlaid
melodies originally written for another project, using misremem-
bered fragments of *Love's Work* as their text. Importantly, these
melodies were captured using a stethoscope microphone. There
is a sort of opacity, then, produced through the resonance of a
chest, a microphone with a lower fidelity than what might be
used for the external voice, and the pulse of a heart. The sounds
are evocative of and capture literal intimacy, vibratory patterns

Stethoscope microphone

caught in the vocal folds from which they emerge. However, there is also a sense of severance to them – it is clear these sounds are somehow external to the performer despite their evocation of the internal. They are not an amplification of the singer in real time, but are suggestive of an intimacy somehow held at arm's length.

This material emerges three times alongside the live performance. To my ears, these sounds that so evidently signal internality deployed in such a manner might be read either as piercing or permeation of the live performance: another voice, one that is both intimate and distant, almost as if described by the leaps of Rose's written vocal register, now contend with the contained performance of its very expression.

For the purposes of this publication I provide a video of the piece's premiere by Lotte Betts-Dean at Clothworkers Centenary Concert Hall, Leeds, on 20 March 2024, and, below, the score and performance notes.[5] Though these materials are simple enough to be performed by very many singers, a successful rendition depends entirely upon a singer who is both technically proficient for a subtle and understated delivery and emotionally sensitive enough to convey Rose's ultimately heart-breaking words. Lotte performs this piece beautifully – sympathetic and trusting performers make a composer's role infinitely easier and more rewarding.

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5. https://youtu.be/UM2vbEW3TyQ.

They no longer call my name. (They no longer even use my name.)
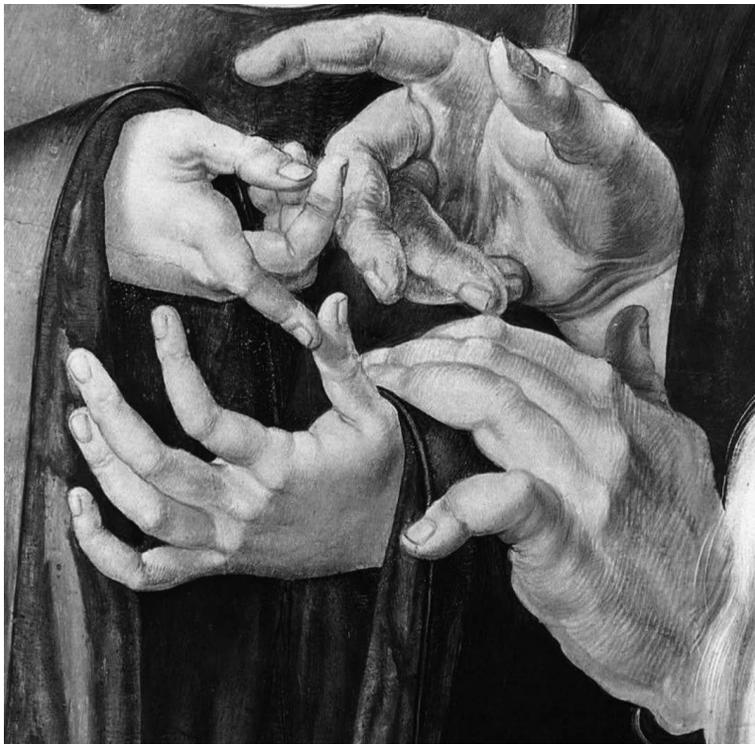
For mezzo-soprano and audio
Ed Cooper, 2024

Performance Notes

They no longer call my name. (They no longer even use my name.) is a piece for mezzo-soprano and audio. The audio track can be obtained from the composer at coopered@live.co.uk.

The work primarily adopts a floating, loose metre with no defined bars. These passages are 'punctured' with more rhythmically defined material. This material should be performed *espressivo* yet feel somewhat restrained. Though the singer will likely be classically-trained, a fully classical tone—as such—need not be used; instead, a breathier, even folk-like quality is preferred. The premiere recording by Lotte Betts-Dean serves as a useful reference.

The audio comprises revised materials from a piece originally composed for Stephanie Lamprea. It should begin as the performer starts (note: the track opens with silence) and should be dispersed through stereo speakers. At its peak, the audio should be slightly louder than the singer. The singer should largely ignore the audio, allowing it to drift around and over their voice. There are some cues for when the voice and audio should align.

The text is drawn from Gillian Rose's memoir *Love's Work*. The pronouns within the third paragraph have been changed to 'they', and the altered line has been used as a something of a refrain. The original passage is included below in full:

> Hands no longer marvel at the beauty of hands: they cease to stroke, slowly, repeatedly, the long, speechful fingers; her hands can no longer reach their short, maladroit, childlike friends. Palm no longer paddles in palm, kissing with inside lip.
>
> Lips still meet lips, full enough for breach of promise, unlike the lipless organs of politicians. Lip no longer sucks in lip, tongue roving around the songlines, greeting whorl upon whorl of inner ear. The embrace of face by face is the true carnival of sex beyond gender.
>
> He no longer calls my name. (He no longer even uses my name.)
>
> 'Loss' is a loose description. The movement from eros passion through the passion of faith to…

They no longer call my name. (They no longer even use my name.) was written for Lotte Betts-Dean and premiered at Clothworkers Centenary Concert Hall, Leeds, 20 March 2024.

The title page artwork for this score is a detail of *Christ Among the Doctors* (1596) by Albrecht Dürer.

They no longer call my name.
(They no longer even use my name.)

Ed Cooper, 2024
Text adapted from Gillian Rose's *Love's Work* (1995)

♩ = c. 65
rhythmically free; *espressivo* yet somewhat restrained
plaintive, light, understated

START AUDIO WITH SINGING
Audio starts with silence; loose cues are given throughout score

Generally *p* with occasional variation
Sporadically add small ornamentations (turns, trills etc.)

Hands no lon – ger mar – vel at the

beau – ty of hands: they cease to stroke, slow–ly, re –

♩ = c. 70
flowing

Audio very gradually
begins to fade in

pea – ted – ly, They no lon – ger call my name.

As before

(They no lon – ger ev – en use my name.) the long

speech – ful fin – gers; their hands can no

lon-ger reach their short, mal – a –

driot, child – like friends. Palm no lon – ger pa-ddles

in palm, kiss – ing with in – side lip.

sim.

Lips still meet lips, They no lon – ger call my name.

Audio fade out

sim.

(They no lon – ger ev – en use my name.) full e – nough

for breach of pro – mise, un – like the lip –

Audio fade in

less or – gans of po – li – ti – ci–ans. Lip no lon – ger sucks

in lip, tongue＿ rov – ing a – round the song – lines,

gree – ting whorl u – pon whorl＿ of in – ner ear.

The em – brace of face by face is the true

Audio fade out

carn – i – val＿＿ of sex be – yond gen – der.

sim.

They no lon – ger call my name. (They no lon – ger ev – en use

Wait for audio to fade in
before beginning this phrase

my name.) 'Loss' is a loose de – scrip–tion.

The move – ment from er – os pass – ion

through the pass – ion of＿＿ faith＿ to

sim.

They no lon – ger call my name. (They no lon – ger ev – en use

Wait for audio to fade out

my name.) They no lon – ger call my name.

(They no lon – ger ev – en use my name.)

PHILOSOPHY, THEOLOGY, POLITICS

5

Gillian Rose, interpreter of Walter Benjamin: the 'unintended consequences' of asceticism

ELETTRA STIMILLI

One of the most interesting aspects of Gillian Rose's reflections is her attempt to bridge the gap between existential eros and philosophical logos through the 'work of love', as she masterfully showed in her final work.[1] This relates to what she calls the 'life affair', in which love is curiously connected to reason not only as the transparent and logical faculty of knowledge, but also, and essentially, as a matter of risk.

According to Rose, the separation between love and reason was expanded after Auschwitz as an internal trauma of reason, making it difficult to process mourning. Rose explores this trauma, as well as the trauma of Auschwitz itself, in relation to the self-elaboration of postmodernity. This analysis is particularly illuminating because it sheds light on the dangerous postmodern tendency to render both modernity and Judaism mutually incomprehensible. I believe this is a key issue that remains at the heart of our challenging present, a time still suspended between promise and perdition.

Rose's approach of developing a new, comprehensive and critical reflection on Judaism and modernity by intertwining eros

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1. Gillian Rose, *Love's Work* (1995), Penguin, London, 2024.

and logos, Jerusalem and Athens, is crucial for reactivating the fruitful potential of our cultural and political history.

According to Rose, postmodernism coincides with the disillusionment with rationalism – that is, with the disappearance *of rationalism without reason*, as she says.[2] In the wake of the crisis of Marxism in postmodern time, Athens, which had long been arid and crumbling, became a deserted city, haunted by departed spirits. On the other hand, a pilgrimage to an imaginary Jerusalem has developed in search of difference, otherness, love or community, in an attempt to escape the imperium of reason. In Rose's analysis, the most exemplary authors in this regard are Jacques Derrida and Emmanuel Levinas.[3]

In her book *Mourning Becomes the Law*, published posthumously in 1996, just three years after Derrida's *Specters of Marx*[4] and five years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, when the effects of neoliberal globalization were still emerging, Rose wrote:

> To oppose new ethics to the old city, Jerusalem to Athens, is to succumb to loss, to refuse to mourn, to cover persisting anxiety with the violence of a New Jerusalem masquerading as love. The possibility of structural analysis and of political action are equally undermined by the evasion of the anxiety and ambivalence inherent in power and knowledge. Why, I asked myself, did the large audience applaud so vigorously at the conference to celebrate the Centenary of Walter Benjamin's birth, held at University College London ... when told by a speaker that the masses have been anaesthetized by mass culture and mass media? What satisfaction, intellectual and political, is there in hearing the affirmation of total control? The active investment in power and anxious projection of it are exhibited in the response of that angry, anarchic audience to the proclamation of their own ineluctable disempowerment. This is to exhibit the

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2. Gillian Rose, *Mourning Becomes the Law*: *Philosophy and Representation*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1996, p. 7.
3. Gillian Rose, 'Of Derrida's Spirit', in *Judaism and Modernity: Philosophical Essays*, Verso, London and New York, 2017, pp. 65–87; 'Angry Angels – Simone Weil and Emmanuel Levinas', in ibid., pp. 211–23.
4. Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International* (1993), Routledge, London, 1994.

same phantasized desire for political community without boundary walls at which to mourn; and without a soul, with its vulnerable and renegotiable boundaries, to bring to wail at those walls.[5]

I find this passage shockingly relevant today, when the masses continue to be anaesthetized by mass culture and the media, despite the violent images of wars they witness every day. Consequently, a profound lack emerges: a lack of debate about the affirmation of total control, which fails to pay attention to the need to develop the political and cultural means to negotiate with the fragile and vulnerable aspects of human life, with its limits and the differences which characterized it.

I really like the way Rose's work focuses on the possibilities for negotiation that the human condition can offer in relation to its fragilities. It is from this perspective that she develops her analysis of Benjamin's work. Her interpretation of Benjamin is embedded in her analysis of philosophy after Auschwitz.

The theological-political sources of Benjamin's thinking

In her essay written to celebrate the centenary of Benjamin's birth, published in *Judaism and Modernity*, Rose develops a personal approach to assessing Benjamin's thought 'out of the sources of modern Judaism'.[6] Here it will not be a question of referring to Judaism, whether traditional or modern, in order to demonstrate the patterning of Benjamin's complex work; on the contrary, Rose proposes a way of understanding the complexity of Benjamin's work which yields itself the difficulty of his relation to Judaism. This approach to Benjamin's thinking aims to make it possible to derive the meaning that Judaic categories exhibit within it.

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5. Rose, *Mourning Becomes the Law*, p. 36.
6. Rose, 'Walter Benjamin – Out of the Sources of Modern Judaism', in *Judaism and Modernity*, p. 12.

Rose's idea is that Benjamin's work, as well as the modern era he analyses, features an intrinsically religious dimension. This dimension is never neutralized by the process of secularization. This religious, spiritual dimension is represented by the concept of the 'beautiful soul', a notion taken up by authors such as Goethe, Hegel and Kierkegaard, all of whom Rose references in this regard, and whom she also sees present in Benjamin's work.

However, unexpectedly, Rose emphasizes the importance of Max Weber in Benjamin's work, more than anyone else. Why is this aspect unexpected from my point of view? Not only is Max Weber one of the authors least mentioned by Benjamin; he is also rarely mentioned in the most important analyses of the relationship between religion and politics in Benjamin's work.[7] Carl Schmitt is the author who is generally mentioned in this regard.

In an important footnote to 'Walter Benjamin – Out of the Sources of Modern Judaism', Rose clearly states that the method she employed aims to

> construe the continuity, first, between Max Weber and Benjamin, and, equally, between Benjamin and Carl Schmitt's theories of sovereignty and emergency, which are crucial to understand the Benjaminian analysis of modernity.[8]

The issue at stake here is political theology. It is notable, however, that she prioritizes the continuity between Weber and Benjamin over that between Schmitt and Benjamin.

The bibliographical reference that Rose made in this footnote is very interesting. She mentions Norbert Bolz's essay 'Charisma und Souveranität: Carl Schmitt und Walter Benjamin im

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7. See Michael Löwy, 'Le capitalisme comme religion: Walter Benjamin et Max Weber', in *Raisons Politiques* 23, 2006, pp. 203–19; and Elettra Stimilli, 'Die ökonomische Macht: Die Gewalt eines 'verschuldenden Kultus', in Mauro Ponzi, Sarah Scheibenberger, Dario Gentili and Elettra Stimilli, eds, *Der Kult des Kapitals: Kapitalismus uns Religion bei Walter Benjamin*, Universitätsverlag, Heidelberg, 2017, pp. 55–70.
8. Rose, 'Walter Benjamin – Out of the Sources of Modern Judaism', note 19.

Schatten Max Webers', published in 1993 in the first volume of the series *Religionstheorie und Politische Theologie*, edited by Jacob Taubes.[9] This volume focuses entirely on Carl Schmitt. Rose's intention is clearly to engage with the German debate on political theology and on the possibility of affirming or not a complete separation of modernity from religion.

A look at Gillian Rose's and Jacob Taubes' interpretations

One of the most interesting contributors to this debate is Jacob Taubes himself, who is indirectly mentioned by Rose in the footnote in the text on Benjamin. He was one of the first figures in Germany to address the controversial relationship between Walter Benjamin and Carl Schmitt. In addition to being a heretical rabbi known for his theological–political interpretation of Paul of Tarsus's *Letter to the Romans,* Taubes is also renowned for his personal relationship with Schmitt, as well as for his comparative analysis of Benjamin and Schmitt.[10] This earned him severe criticism from enlightened post-World War II German culture, which was not accustomed to linking the exiled Marxist intellectual of Jewish origin with the Nazi jurist.

The correspondence between Taubes and Schmitt includes the minutes from a 1978–9 seminar on political theology entitled 'Politische Theologie als Theorie von Revolution und Gegenrevolution am Beispiel von Walter Benjamin und Carl Schmitt' (Political Theology as a Theory of Revolution and Counter Revolution in the Example of Walter Benjamin and

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9. See Norbert Bolz, 'Charisma and Souveränität: Carl Schmitt und Walter Benjamin im Schatten Max Webers', in Jacob Taubes, ed., *Religionstheorie und Politische Theologie*, Volume 1: *Der Fürst dieser Welt: Carl Schmitt und die Folgen*, Wilhelm Fink, Munich, 1993, pp. 249–62.

10. See Jacob Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul*, trans. Dana Hollander, Stanford University Press, Redwood City CA, 2003; and *To Carl Schmitt: Letters and Reflections*, trans. Keith Tribe with an introduction by Mike Grimshaw, Columbia University Press, New York, 2013.

Carl Schmitt).[11] In this section Taubes references a letter that Benjamin wrote to Schmitt in 1930. The letter acknowledges the influence of Schmitt's approach on Benjamin's own work. Regarding this aspect, Taubes writes:

> In the *Correspondence*, Adorno and Scholem wanted to suppress this letter from Benjamin, just as they also removed all traces leading from Benjamin to Schmitt. Therefore, ... it will be necessary to safeguard these traces against the intentions of the editors of Benjamin's *Nachlass*, in order to compare the theological–political reflections of Carl Schmitt with those of Walter Benjamin.[12]

For Taubes, the fact that Adorno and Scholem obscured this connection is problematic. In his view, the strength and relevance of Benjamin's political approach is at stake here. Benjamin did not hesitate to engage with the culture that nurtured National Socialism. He recognized a fundamental theoretical core in it. This was not only for criticizing progressive and liberal ideology. He also wanted to face the events he was witnessing with clarity. For me, the question now is whether Rose's interpretation is motivated by a similar intention to Taubes', albeit with different conclusions.

Both criticize the separation between modern reason and the existential experience of religion, a view that is characteristic of a simplified understanding of the modern and postmodern processes of secularization. Furthermore, both authors argue that the relationship between religion and politics in the modern era is more complex than analyses emphasizing complete disconnection suggest. This explains Taubes' interest in the relationship between Benjamin and Schmitt. Benjamin was interested in the structural link between religion and politics as

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11. Jacob Taubes and Carl Schmitt, *Briefwechsel mit Materialen*, ed. Herbert Kopp-Oberstebrink, Thorsten Palzhoff, Martin Treml, Wilhelm Fink Verlag, Munich, 2012, p. 211.
12. Ibid.

investigated by Schmitt, as well as Schmitt's criticism of progressive and liberal ideology.

On the other hand, unlike Taubes, Rose does not follow the thread that leads from Benjamin to Schmitt. For her, the more important issue is the role of Max Weber in defining the 'spirit of fascism', which is central to Benjamin's work. Moreover, it is interesting how Rose analyses this 'spirit' in philosophical terms. She claims:

> In philosophical terms the spirit of Fascism does not mean that spiritual value is accorded to Fascism, but that Benjamin derives the meaning of 'Fascism' from the violence of its relation to actuality – and this is spirit in Hegel's sense of misrecognition of otherness. Fascist violence is itself derived from the change in the structure of experience – the subjectivity which issues from and responds to the atrophy of substance.[13]

In order to define practices that can cultivate this spirit, Rose refers to Weber's investigation of the unintended effects of worldly asceticism in relation to the origins of capitalism. While Weber explored the connection between the Protestant ethic and 'the spirit of capitalism', the worldly asceticism which establishes the preconditions for the development of rational capitalist accumulation and investment, according to Rose, Benjamin explored further the unintended psychological and political consequences of Protestant *Innerlichkeit* (inwardness) and worldly asceticism on fascism. From this point of view, in Benjamin's analysis, what is at stake is the way in which the Protestant doctrine of salvation creates hypertrophy of the inner life because of dismissing good works.[14] According to Rose, the hypertrophy of the inner

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13. Rose, 'Walter Benjamin – Out of the Sources of Modern Judaism', p. 181.

14. For an interesting analysis of the influence of Lutheranism on Benjamin's view of the Baroque drama as a 'drama of fate', of a history that repeats itself eternally, see Miguel Vatter, 'Sovereignity and Revolutionary Astropolitics: Benjamin, Baroque Trauerspiel and Calderón's *Life Is a Dream*', in Brando Moran and Paula Schwebel, eds, *Benjamin and Political Theology*, Bloomsbury, London, 2024, pp. 50–72. In the same volume, see also the essay by Paula Schwebel, 'Melancholy Sovereignty and the Politics of Sin'.

life is correlated with the atrophy of political participation that characterizes the fascist way of life homogenized in the masses. Eventually, the interest in salvation itself (the promise) atrophies, but the inner anxiety of salvation persists and is combined with worldly opportunism and ruthlessness (the perdition). The point, for Rose, is this separation – and combination – of anxiety and ruthlessness; promise and perdition.

The 'spirit of fascism' and 'capitalism as religion'

I have addressed the issue of the role that Weber played in Benjamin's research in my work on debt, with reference to the 1921 fragment 'Capitalism as a Religion', which, as far as I am aware, Rose does not mention.[15] This fragment is part of Benjamin's unfinished youthful project dedicated to politics, which also includes other famous texts, such as 'Critique of Violence' and the 'Theological-Political Fragment'.[16] These works are examined by Rose, but as singular autonomous texts. This a problem. In the fragment 'Capitalism as a Religion'[17] Benjamin clearly highlights the mechanism of indebtedness that lies behind the capitalist economy. The link between 'debt' and 'guilt', implicit in the German word *Schuld/Schulden*, which encompasses both meanings, is central to his reasoning.

When Benjamin defines capitalism as a religion, he is considering a link between the two domains that is not concerned with the historical development of secularizations. For Benjamin, it is part of the 'structure' of capitalism itself to possess a religious

15. See Elettra Stimilli, *The Debt of the Living: Asceticism and Capitalism*, trans. Arianna Bove with an introduction by Roberto Esposito, SUNY Press, New York, 2017, pp. 114–17; and *Debt and Guilt*, trans. Stefania Porcelli, Bloomsbury, London 2018, pp. 94–101.

16. See Benjamin's letters to Gershom Scholem (1 December 1920) and to Gottfried Salomn-Delatour (24 December 1925) in W. Benjamin, *Gesammelte Briefe*, Band III (*1925–1930*), ed. C. Gödde and H. Lonitz, Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt 1997.

17. Walter Benjamin, *Kapitalismus als Religion,* in *Gesammelte Schriften*, Band VI, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser, Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt, 1985, pp. 100–103.

configuration. But, most importantly, this structure does not belong to the domain of dogma and theology. It has nothing to do with the truth of a state of affairs to which it has to adapt, recognizing or legitimizing an authority; rather, it fulfils merely practical tasks. It is a praxis that does not need a theoretical apparatus; although it decides over the state of exception, it does not presuppose a transcendental order that legitimizes its work, as in the case of state sovereignty determined in theological–political terms.

It is indicative in this regard that, in defining capitalism as an essentially religious phenomenon in this fragment, Benjamin refers to Max Weber and to the thesis on the origin of capitalist economy from Protestant inner-worldly asceticism.[18] The reference to Weber is articulated here as a criticism. According to Benjamin, capitalism is not simply 'a formation conditioned by religion', as one might think using the category of secularization employed by Weber to explain the origin of the capitalist economy. Protestant religiosity in its most extreme forms, such as Calvinism and Puritanism, according to Weber, made the process of 'disenchantment' of the world possible, which constitutes the premiss of modern rationality and the consequent development of capitalist economy. However, Weber's discourse will appear more complex if one considers that he does not define the religious conditioning of economic power over capitalism from a theological point of view, but rather defines it starting from the very 'ascetic' conduct of life consistent with the development of capitalist economy. The fulcrum of capitalist dominion – its 'spirit' in Weber's terms – is thus identified in those conducts which, as in the case of inner-worldly asceticism, are 'elected' to adapt to the modes of capitalist production. In this sense, in the fragment 'Capitalism as Religion', it may be

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18. Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the 'Spirit' of Capitalism and Other Writings*, trans. Peter Baehr and Gordon W. Wells, Penguin, London, 2011.

said that Benjamin, while criticizing Weber, does not actually do anything else than radicalize Weber's own approach: *what is crucial in the development of capitalism as a religion is not, in his opinion, the elaboration of a theological apparatus, but the effectiveness of the religious practices that operate in it.*

In Weber's perspective, the dominance of capitalist economy is based on the intimate bond that economic power establishes with individual forms of life. He was, indeed, one of the first to emphasize the centrality of the enterprise and the figure of the entrepreneur in the dominion of capitalist economy, anticipating in a sense the developments that have been witnessed with the hegemony of the figure of the 'entrepreneur of oneself' in neo-liberal forms of capitalist production.[19]

At stake is a sacred value of the excess in capitalism, on which even fascism has fed and which cannot be measured in the linear self-reproduction of capital, because it goes beyond any form of rational domination, yet is decisive for its existence. This is also what Rose defines as the 'spirit of fascism' examined by Benjamin. But, against the dangerous and unintended consequences of ascetic practices that make capitalism a religion and fascism its political form, against any form of 'left-wing melancholy', Benjamin does not shy away from the need to reactivate the emancipatory forces of reason in the class struggle of the oppressed. As he wrote in *The Arcades Project*, it is a matter of 'reclaiming territories on which madness has grown.... To penetrate it with the sharp axe of reason'.[20] This makes it possible to open up an imaginative space able to 'organize pessimism'.[21]

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19. Stimilli, *Debt and Guilt*, p. 41 ff.
20. Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaghlin, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA, 2002, N,1,4.
21. Walter Benjamin, 'Surrealism. The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia', in *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings,* ed. and with an Introduction by Peter Demetz, Schocken Books, New York, 1978, p. 191.

On the contrary, in her text written to celebrate the centenary of Benjamin's birth, Rose argues that Benjamin is the taxonomist of sadness, who adds figures of melancholy to the philosophical repertoire of modern experience; the repertoire which includes resignation and ressentiment. According to her, the messianism he calls into question is also coherent with the Jewish idea of a promised life lived in view of a deferment. It is a stake in a mourning not completed, which remains aberrated not inaugurated. In her battle with any form of 'left-wing melancholy', Rose rather rashly attributes this state also to Benjamin.[22] In this sense, Rose's interpretation of Benjamin seems reductive, in so far as it risks placing the analysis within a static opposition between the violence (of capitalism and fascism) and its abolition. Such a reading, in reducing his view to alternative versions of apocalypse (destructive or redemptive), elides the centrality Benjamin accords the modern subject in negotiating the possibility of individual and collective experiences of life.

Or Derrida?

Roses's interpretation of Benjamin is illuminating in relation to her focus on Weber as Benjamin's key author in the analysis of the 'spirit of fascism'. But the critique she elaborated in her text written to celebrate the centenary of Benjamin's birth seems excessively influenced by Derrida's use of Benjamin.[23] Instead, in her essay on 'Derrida's Spirit', she explicitly distances herself from Derrida's interpretation of Benjamin and, implicitly, from her own interpretation of Benjamin as taxonomist of sadness. There she clearly states:

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22. On this issue more generally, see Wendy Brown, 'Resisting Left Melancholy', in *Boundary 2*, vol. 26, no. 3, pp. 19–27; and Enzo Traverso, *Left-Wing Melancholia: Marxism, History, and Memory*, Columbia University Press, New York 2017.

23. Jacques Derrida, *Force de loi: Le Fondement mystique de l'autorité*, Editions Galilée, Paris, 1994.

> Benjamin's political reflections presuppose a social theory of capitalist institutions, and amount to the search for a theory of revolutionary practice which will be neither reformist nor justify force as a means of right-making … comparable to Rosa Luxemburg, Benjamin is exploring the relation of theory and practice for a truly democratic revolution which will inaugurate radical democracy at every moment and not postpone it to a post-revolutionary future.[24]

In conclusion, it seems to me that Rose takes two approaches to Benjamin: one based on Derrida's interpretation and the other in opposition to it. Both are important. The former is particularly interesting when it comes to exploring the critical issues of postmodern analyses, which encounter many difficulties when it comes to accepting and elaborating on the potential and limits of modernity. If, as Rose argues, postmodernism identifies itself as a process of endless mourning by renouncing reason, power and truth – lamenting the loss of securities that were never real – then this everlasting melancholia reflects an impossibility: a refusal to let go. Rose eloquently captures this idea in the phrase 'despairing rationalism without reason,[25] which aptly describes certain postmodernist attitudes. Instead, a reassessment of reason, as Rose is interested in doing, but Benjamin too, can gradually rediscover its moveable boundaries, the moveable boundaries of reason as it explores the boundaries of the soul, the city and the sacred. This process can help us confront mourning without separating promise from perdition, but rather recognizing promise even in perdition. This is a decisive step that we still need today. Reading Rose can help us take it.

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24. Rose, 'Of Derrida's Spirit', pp. 85–6.
25. Rose, *Mourning Becomes the Law*, p. 7.

6

'Return to the city'?
Gillian Rose and the pluriverse

KATE SCHICK

Gillian Rose urges us always to start from *where we are* – to pay attention to the here and now in all its rich and storied particularity.[1] Rose's twofold ethics of mourning and political risk invites a dogged and risk-filled engagement with everyday politics that comes to understand and mourn the brokenness of our political contexts and 'return[s] … to the city, renewed and reinvigorated for participation'.[2] In the context of multiple inter-secting local and global crises, Rose's insistence that we keep our minds in hell, and despair not, continues to be an urgent call to political engagement.[3] As Donatella di Cesare recently remarked, the contemporary political landscape is too often characterized by 'apparent wakefulness which in fact conceals a catastrophic sleepwalking': 'it's time for philosophy to return to the city'.[4]

2. Gillian Rose, *Mourning Becomes the Law: Philosophy and Representation*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1996, p. 36.
3. The epigraph to *Love's Work* is: 'Keep your mind in hell, and despair not'. Gillian Rose, *Love's Work: A Reckoning with Life*, Schocken Books, New York, 1995. It is attributed to Staretz Silouan, 1866–1938.
4. Donatella Di Cesare, *It's Time for Philosophy to Return to the City*, CRMEP Books,

In returning to Rose's work after a hiatus, one of the questions at the forefront of my mind has been how to read Rose from my settler colonial context – and how Rose might speak to this context in turn. As a settler-educator living and working in Aotearoa New Zealand, I have in much of my work in recent years grappled with what it means to write and teach from this place, on Indigenous land.[5] In reflecting on the notion of a 'return to the city' from this complex land, one of the questions that has troubled me is: How do we conceive of returning to 'the city' in the context of multiple entangled worlds?[6] What does a 'return to the city' look like if we take pluriversality – the idea that our world is comprised of many worlds – seriously?[7]

In what follows, I think through the notion of 'returns' to political engagement by putting Rose's work in conversation with Bonnie Honig's recent work on refusal, which centres the idea of a return to the city through her retelling of the *Bacchae*, and literature on the pluriverse, which challenges the concept of a 'one-world world' and thereby complicates the notion of a 'return'. The essay has three parts. First, I explore Honig's conception of refusal 'as an arc and not an act', with particular emphasis on the obligation to return to everyday life that completes her agonistic formulation.[8] Second, I trouble the notion of a return via literature on pluriversality, asking *who* has an

London, 2022, p. 18.

5. Kate Schick, 'Oceania: Aotearoa/New Zealand "Teaching IR Theory in Aotearoa New Zealand: Relational and Place-Based Pedagogical Shifts"', in *The Palgrave Handbook on the Pedagogy of International Relations Theory*, Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, 2024, pp. 839–51, https://doi.org/10.1007/978–3–031–72072–7_66; Kate Schick, 'Uncertain Pedagogies: Cultivating Micro-Communities of Learning', in Kate Schick and Claire Timperley, eds, *Subversive Pedagogies: Radical Possibility in the Academy*, Routledge, London, 2021, pp. 92–107.

6. 'The city' can be understood as a 'bounded political entity'. See Rose, *Mourning Becomes the Law*, p. 16.

7. Marisol de la Cadena and Mario Blaser, eds, *A World of Many Worlds*, Duke University Press, Durham NC, 2018; Maggie FitzGerald, *Care and the Pluriverse: Rethinking Global Ethics*, Bristol University Press, Bristol, 2022, https://academic.oup.com/policy-press-scholarship-online/book/45181.

8. Bonnie Honig, *A Feminist Theory of Refusal*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA and London, 2021, p. 103, https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1jpf62p.

obligation to return and *to what*. Third, I turn to Rose's medita-
tions on a political work of mourning to navigate the tensions
between these different visions of political engagement. I argue
that reading Rose alongside Honig deepens and enriches Honig's
notion of a return to the city via her writings on recognition,
failure and faithful re-engagement with everyday politics. In
the face of multiple intersecting worlds, however, the idea that
political actors must all 'return to the city' needs interrogating.
I argue that while a return to political engagement might look
like re-engagement with the structures and institutions of
modern political entities on their own terms, it could also look
like an unravelling of modern law and institutions via exchanges
between worlds. Moreover, I argue that political engagement
can also take the form of a partial or thoroughgoing refusal
of modern law and institutions whereby political actors 'build
elsewhere', where people return to the institutions and laws
that structure their *own* pre-existing but evolving and richly
populated worlds.

   In arguing for a more expansive notion of what it might mean
to return to political engagement, I acknowledge that I am com-
plicating Rose's thought, which focuses on debates arising out
of and centred in modern Europe and, as Jay Bernstein recently
remarked, does not engage with colonialism or the emerging
climate catastrophe.[9] Rose speaks to and from modernity,
starting from the assumption that 'we are moderns' and reaching
towards a 'hesitant universality'.[10] A broken modernity sits at
the centre of her work, informing her critique of the 'easy paths'
of liberal modernity and postmodern critique and her pursuit
instead of philosophy's 'grey in grey'.[11] However, in what follows I

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9. J.M. Bernstein, 'Reification in the Age of Climate Catastrophe: After Gillian Rose's Critique of Marxism', *Thesis Eleven* 186, 2025, p. 35, https://doi.org/10.1177/0725513625 1314516.
10. Rose, *Mourning Becomes the Law*, p. 54.
11. Gillian Rose, *The Broken Middle: Out of Our Ancient Society* Blackwell, Oxford, 1992, p. xi.

argue that despite its rootedness in modernity, Rose's grounded and aporetic ethos can help us to think more expansively about how we might conceptualize and navigate returns in the context of entangled worlds.

Honig's feminist theory of refusal and a 'return to the city'

Bonnie Honig's *A Feminist Theory of Refusal* articulates a rich conception of refusal via an exploration of the figure of Agave in Euripides' play the *Bacchae*. Her rereading of the *Bacchae* takes Agave and the bacchants seriously as political actors instead of writing them off as 'misguided, manipulated or insane'.[12] This radical counter-reading informs Honig's reformulation of feminist refusal as an arc comprising three interrelated refusal concepts – Giorgio Agamben's inoperativity, Adriana Cavarero's inclination and Saidiya Hartman's fabulation – arguing that the three concepts are intertwined and dependent on one another and can be understood as 'moments on an arc of refusal'.[13] In what follows I briefly sketch Honig's arc of refusal in relation to the *Bacchae* before focusing on the last part of Honig's arc with its theme of returning to the city.

Euripides' *Bacchae* tells the story of the introduction of the cult of Dionysus to the city of Thebes. Pentheus, king of Thebes and Agave's son, forbids the women of Thebes from joining the followers of Dionysus and instructs them instead to care for their children. The women refuse to obey and Agave and her sisters lead groups of women (known as baccants or maenads) out of the city to Cithaeron, in what is the first moment in Honig's arc of refusal – inoperativity or the suspension of use.[14] In Cithareron, the women feast and dance, working together to

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12. Honig, *A Feminist Theory of Refusal*, p. xii.
13. Ibid., p. xiii.
14. Ibid., p. 16.

build a heterotopian community that displaces the patriarchy of the city. This is the second moment of Honig's arc of refusal – inclination, whereby the baccants lean into a 'new moral geometry of relationality and care "completely apart" from the autonomous verticalism of the city'.[15] The baccants then kill Pentheus in a tragic move that is both regicidal and filicidal, before returning to the city to claim their place in the third moment in Honig's arc of refusal – fabulation. The city refuses to receive them, however, and, after a failed attempt by Cadmus to restore the women to their domestic roles as wives, mothers and daughters, they are banished and exiled by Dionysus.

The notion of a return to the city is crucial to Honig's conception of refusal and is the provocation for this essay. The baccants' heterotopia on Cithaeron has allowed them to explore new ways of being and doing, insulated from the city. Honig notes that 'when they succeed for a time, heterotopia valuably serve as spaces or times of rehearsal where alternative forms of life can be tried out and explored'.[16] In Hartman's refusal concept, fabulation, she renarrates the tragic stories of 'riotous black girls, troublesome women, and queer radicals' who find a deep sense of belonging through 'membership in a chorus'.[17] However, Honig notes that there is no return to the city for Hartman's chorus and thus 'the escape and collectivity offered by the chorus are short-lived'.[18] For refusal to be truly political, Honig argues, it cannot remain insulated from the structures and institutions of the city: 'If refusal is to be a politics, and fabulation part of a feminist theory of refusal, then *returning to the city to claim it is key.*'[19]

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15. Ibid., p. 4. Honig pushes Cavarero's concept of inclination beyond the maternal to the sororal, exploring inclination in the *Bacchae* 'not as maternal care, not only, but also as agonistic sororal action in concert', a conception that leaves more room for the intertwining of love and volence. Ibid., p. 58.

16. Ibid., p. 71.

17. Saidiya Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval*, W.W. Norton , New York, 2019.

18. Honig, *A Feminist Theory of Refusal*, p. 74.

19. Ibid., p. 95; emphasis mine.

In Honig's refabulation of the *Bacchae*, she narrates the return
to the city after the women's time on Cithaeron, saying:

> They achieve the limited but splendid freedom of fugitivity and
> something approximating the jubilation of jubilee. But something
> was missing. It all felt somehow unreal and maybe also temporary.
> What was missing was ... the fabulation provided by the polis of
> remembrance... the women of the *Bacchae*, who want stories told
> of their courageous equality, look to the city, too. Agave aims to
> establish the equality of women in the polis as its norm and not
> just outside it for an exceptional moment. It is, we may say using
> Arendt's words, as though the women who returned from Cithaeron
> 'had wished to make permanent the space of action which had
> arisen from their deeds and sufferings, to prevent its perishing with
> their dispersal and return to their isolated' households. They want
> to be real.[20]

The desire to return to the city, according to this reading, is
tied to a desire 'to be real', to return with their whole selves to
'remake' themselves and the city alike. Tragically, though, neither
the women nor the city are ready for their return and Dionysus
exiles the bacchants, along with Cadmus and his wife, from the
city. Honig's Arendtian rereading of this failed return sees it as a
'tragedy of the city', where a return has the power to disturb and
reconfigure the everyday practices of the city and, in so doing,
'inaugurate a politics' beyond fugitivity.[21] In their collective
unreadiness for a return, the work that might have been achieved
via the women's disruption of taken-for-granted structures and
practices fails to be done. This failure to challenge and recon-
figure the city is the tragedy missed by conventional readings of
the story.

The failure of the bacchants' return highlights the risk in-
volved in returning to the city. Honig speaks of double unreadi-
ness – the unreadiness of the women and the unreadiness of the

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20. Ibid., p. 93.
21. Ibid., p. 95.

city. The unreadiness of the women is illustrated by how quickly Agave loses her newfound understanding of herself and her role as a leader outside patriarchal structures. The unreadiness of the city is illustrated by its unwillingness to receive the women as anything other than wayward transgressors needing to be reabsorbed back into the fold, into pre-existing and unchanged structures. At stake in this drama is a struggle over *what is* and *what could be*. By clinging to structures- and politics-as-usual, the city refuses to take the risk of thinking anew or imagining otherwise. For the women, their new understandings, new stories, new worlds are put at risk via a return to the city. As Honig puts it: 'The risk of the return to the city is absorption into the city's conflicts and the loss of our bearings. It is against this that we rehearse.' For Honig, however, despite the very real risk of failure, the return to the city is deeply important because it is in the *return* that the 'promise of refusal as a world-building practice' lies – where lives come up against other lives, where we find our way towards living together.[22]

In her conclusion to *A Feminist Theory of Refusal*, Honig references a speech by Bernice Johnson Reagon in which she exhorts women at a music festival to take what they have experienced over the course of the weekend, 'digest it' and 'apply it … every day you get up and find yourself alive'.[23] Honig uses Reagon's reflections on returning to everyday life after a music festival to illustrate the arc of refusal in a different context and to highlight its importance as a 'world-building practice' that can shape everyday life. She argues:

> You have the right to leave, the right to build elsewhere, but you also have an obligation to return because we are all depending on each other. We may succeed or fail. But we are in it together. This

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22. Ibid., pp. 103–4.
23. Bernice Johnson Reagon, 'Coalition Politics: Turning the Century', *Feministische Studien*, vol. 33, no. 1, 2015, pp. 115–23, https://doi.org/10.1515/fs-2015–0115.

commitment is not for everyone all the time. But it is part of the promise of refusal as a world-building practice, and this makes of refusal a politics far larger than political theory's old debates about civil disobediance and more daunting even than the heroic politics to which we build monuments.[24]

For Honig, a return to the city opens space for disruptive and generative politics, a commitment to collectively challenge oppressive structures and practices and build worlds that arc towards justice.

The pluriversal challenge: Whose return and whose responsibility?

Honig argues that in order for a politics of refusal to be truly political, it cannot remain outside the city, insulated from unjust institutions and laws. We have a 'right to build elsewhere' but 'an obligation to return'. The narrative that emerges in this refusal story is one that hinges on a return to the same political context that has been left and a strong commitment to engage with and trouble the laws, norms and institutions of that political entity. In that sense, while it is a challenging vision it is also a tidy vision; the narrative speaks of political actors leaving and returning to a political system that is their own, however flawed. In what follows I explore the ways in which this vision is complicated where different laws and institutions and different ways of knowing and being coexist on the same land. I trouble the notion of an *obligation* to return to the city by asking 'whose return, and to where?' I argue that the notion of a return is complicated by the existence of 'multiple, distinct, yet inter-twined' worlds characterized by different ways of knowing and being.[25] I suggest that building elsewhere – outside the context

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24. Honig, *A Feminist Theory of Refusal*, p. 104.
25. FitzGerald, *Care and the Pluriverse*, p. 3.

of the 'one-world world' – can, in fact, be *deeply political* in the context of the modern world which itself refuses Indigenous ways of being, knowing and acting.[26] In the context of a planet in peril and global politics in turmoil, building elsewhere and otherwise can be not only deeply political but even imperative. In troubling the notion of a return, I do not suggest that building elsewhere is something that can happen in isolation from other worlds; the pursuit of purity belies the inevitable *impurity* of political engagement and risks. However, in the spirit of more deeply engaging with the contours of justice and injustice *where we are*, it is crucial we take the pluriverse and its complication of everday politics seriously.

The notion of the pluriverse calls into question the necessity of a 'return to the city', where the city is understood as the modern world.[27] The concept of the pluriverse acknowledges that we do not live in a 'single container world' in which a reified reality is populated by peoples with different beliefs and cultures; instead, we live in a 'multiple world of different enactments' in which the worlds themselves are characterized not only by different understandings, or different stories, but different realities.[28] As Maggie FitzGerald puts it,

> on the one hand there is one world – we share a material existence, we are connected in and through relations of power, and we also often share concepts, language practices, and other aspects of our collective forms of life. At the same time, however, there are many worlds; there are different collective worlding practices that enact different worlds, and these worlds are sometimes in excess of each other ... *there are different ways of being/knowing.*[29]

26. John Law, 'What's Wrong with a One-World World?', *Distinktion: Journal of Social Theory*, vol. 16, no. 1, 2015, pp. 126–39, https://doi.org/10.1080/1600910x.2015.1020066; Simon Barber, 'Māori Mārx: Some Provisional Materials', *Counterfutures* 8, 2019, p. 71, https://doi.org/10.26686/cf.v8i0.6348.

27. Marisol de la Cadena, *Earth Beings: Ecologies of Practice across Andean Worlds*, Duke University Press, Durham NC, 2015; De la Cadena and Blaser, *A World of Many Worlds*; FitzGerald, *Care and the Pluriverse*.

28. Law, 'What's Wrong with a One-World World?', p. 127.

29. FitzGerald, *Care and the Pluriverse*, p. 3.

An understanding of the world characterized by a complicated entwining of different but connected worlds calls us to 'dwell in the messy entanglements that connect worlds and pay attention to the ways in which the enactments of certain worlds are prevented or disparaged through these entanglements'.[30] This more nuanced account of contemporary global politics complicates social and political engagement and shifts justice talk away from simple 'inclusion', recognizing that in the context of the pluriverse '[t]here *is* no "overarching"' – and therefore difference is not something that can simply be 'included' in an 'all encompassing reality' or mediated via higher order liberal institutions.[31] Instead, as Law puts it, understanding that the world is plural invites us to 'craft [encounters] that are themselves contingent, modest, practical and thoroughly down to earth'.[32]

The pluriverse is deeply and inescapably political. Comprising different worlds situated in a 'relational web of ontoepistemologies', it is characterized by radical differences in terms of power, recognition and access to resources. Indeed, as FitzGerald argues, when these relations are 'arranged as a hierarchy of domination, certain worlds exist outside of "politics"; they are rendered invisible or incomprehensible by the logic of the dominant world'.[33] The dominant world – modernity – has actively sought to erase other worlds through colonization and through the expansion of a capitalist logic that has, for many, become a 'commonsense' outside which it is difficult to think otherwise. As Simon Barber argues, capitalism constrains our imaginations, asserting the commodity-world 'as the only possible reality'. Relationships between capitalism and other worlds are characterized by domination, marked by a 'readiness to refuse, extinguish or flatten other modes of life' as well as by

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30. Ibid., p. 7.
31. Law, 'What's Wrong with a One-World World?', pp. 127–8.
32. Ibid., p. 128.
33. FitzGerald, *Care and the Pluriverse*, p. 8.

a desecration of Papatūānuku, the earth on which we reside.[34]
In this narrow vision, 'the world of the powerful' is a world in
which 'only one world fits'.[35] It is also a world under threat, as the
commodification of nature wreaks destruction on our planet. In
this context, Law speaks of the urgency of challenging the 'one-
world metaphysics' that dominates contemporary global politics
via the enacting and re-enacting of 'one-world realities'. He
argues further that in doing so we must urgently 'inquire about
the practices that enact Other multiple world realities' and 'pick
through the practices within the North that multiply realities',
acknowledging that the 'North' itself is not uniform despite its
capture by modern capitalism.[36]

In the face of persistent erasures of rich and complex ways of
knowing–being–doing outside modernity, the notion of a 'return
to the city' becomes troubling. I argue that where 'the city'
represents the modern world we must complicate the *obligation*
to return. Honig herself recognizes that a commitment to return
is 'not for everyone all the time',[37] and the concept of the pluri-
verse helps us to understand the limits of this call, particularly in
contexts where modern political environments actively suppress
and harm other worlds, as in settler colonial contexts. Troubling
and displacing the notion of a return to 'the city' opens a wider
horizon of political engagement and creates space for a more
thoroughgoing refusal where worlds collide. This more expansive
arc of refusal remains agonistic: it invites us simultaneously to
think otherwise and to return to everyday politics, wherever that
is located.

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34. Barber, 'Māori Mārx', p. 71. In Aotearoa New Zealand, Papatūānuku is the land
and the earth mother. Wife of Ranginui, sky father, Papatūānuku gives birth to all living
things. See https://teara.govt.nz/en/papatuanuku-the-land.
35. De la Cadena and Blaser, *A World of Many Worlds*, p. 3.
36. Law, 'What's Wrong with a One-World World?', p. 128.
37. Honig, *A Feminist Theory of Refusal*, p. 104.

Starting from the middle: brokenness, failure, faith

In this final section I explore the notion of returns to political engagement in the context of entangled worlds via Gillian Rose's writings on mourning and political risk. Although Rose's writings are rooted in modern Europe and take modernity as given, I argue that her work can help us to think through a more complicated political landscape because of her dogged commitment to start with *what is* – to begin 'in the middle'.[38] She emphatically rejects utopian short cuts to heaven, be they via the epistemic certainty of progressive rationalism and its claim to 'absolute and universal authority' or messianic visions of postmodernism that hold space for alternative futures but invite a 'counsel of hopelessness' in the here and now.[39] Speaking from and to modernity, Rose directs our attention to the brokenness of modernity and its manifestations 'in history, in polity, in institutions, in *dominium*'. Working towards justice, she argues, must always be grounded in a commitment to come to better understand the 'broken but locatable' middle. In the face of this brokenness, she insists that we come to better understand its contours – via a political work of mourning – and that we commit to aporetic engagement in the political life of the city, 'without a path'. It is this faithful commitment to risky engagement with political actuality that makes Rose's work so powerful in the context of thinking about 'returns'. [40]

The epigraph to Rose's philosophical memoir *Love's Work* is 'keep your mind in hell, and despair not'.[41] This epigraph goes to the heart of Rose's response to the brokenness of modernity, urging us to stay with the difficulty – to 'keep [our] mind[s] in

38. Rose, *The Broken Middle*, p. 153.
39. Rose, *Love's Work*, p. 128; Rose, *Mourning Becomes the Law*, p. 70. See also the discussion in Kate Schick, '"Keep Your Mind in Hell, and Despair Not": Gillian Rose's Anti-Pelagianism', in Vassilios Paipais, ed., *The Civil Condition in World Politics: Between Tragedy and Utopianism*, Bristol University Press, Bristol, 2022, pp. 75–94.
40. Rose, *The Broken Middle*, pp. 288, 201.
41. Rose, *Love's Work*. Attributed to Staretz Silouan, 1866–1938.

hell' – and to journey towards a deeper understanding of the structures and practices of misrecognition that shape our social and political worlds. She enjoins us to 'despair not' in the face of suffering and injustice, however – to refuse tragic resignation or despair in response to continued abuses of power and privilege. In the place of easy paths that would abscond responsibility and avoid the difficult work of everyday politics, Rose invites us to a political work of mourning that

> returns the soul to the city, renewed and reinvigorated for participation, ready to take on the difficulties and injustices of the existing city. The mourner returns to negotiate and challenge the changing inner and outer boundaries of the soul and of the city; she returns to their perennial anxiety.[42]

Like Honig, then, Rose is committed to agonistic (re)engagement with the proverbial city, insisting on a dogged engagement in everyday politics that makes injustice and suffering 'visible and speakable' and takes the risk of political action in response.[43]

In her reflections on a return to the city, Honig remarks that 'we may succeed or fail', gesturing towards the likelihood that failure may accompany our attempts to re-engage with the life of the city. However, Honig does little to develop the theme of failure. The notion of failure is deeply woven throughout Rose's work and can resource engagement with the more complex political landscape that the pluriverse entails. In *Hegel Contra Sociology*, Rose emphasizes the 're-' of Hegel's *Anerkennen* or 're-cognition', the need to revise our understanding or 'know again' after inevitable misrecognition. Recognition invites us to re-examine what we think we understand – 'the familiar or well known' – in order to better understand our social world.[44] To

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42. Rose, *Mourning Becomes the Law*, p. 36.
43. Ibid.
44. Gillian Rose, *Hegel Contra Sociology*, Athlone, London, 1981, p. 71. See also Kate Schick, 'Re-cognizing Recognition: Gillian Rose's "Radical Hegel" and Vulnerable Recognition', *Telos* 173, 2015, pp. 87–105.

start with *what is*, for Rose, is to embark on a difficult journey towards recognition marked by repeated failures and faithful re-engagement as we trace the brokenness of modernity. Beginning in the middle invites us to political engagement, to risk 'the anxiety of beginning' despite not knowing what will eventuate. Rose argues that '[l]earning ... works precisely by making mistakes, by taking the risk of action, and then by reflecting on its unintended consequences, and then taking the risk, yet again, of further action, and so on'.[45] Her ethos of political engagement in the face of complexity and through failure deepens and enriches Honig's notion of a return to the city. It also helps us to think through a more nuanced notion of returns to political engagement in the context of the pluriverse.

Rose and the pluriverse

As I acknowledged earlier, putting Rose's work in conversation with literatures on pluriversality complicates her thought, taking it outside modern Europe and unsettling its 'hesitant universality'. A pluriversal lens unsettles the *obligation* to return to the bounded political entity of the modern state and economy in contexts where worlds collide. While there is a tidiness to narratives centred in modernity, such narratives fail to reflect the complexity and multiplicity of global politics; nor do they reckon with the harm wrought by the continuing dispossession of non-modern worlds through colonization and the embedding of capitalist modernity. I argue that a Rosean aporetic sensibility can help us to stay with the difficulty of thinking and acting in the context of multiple worlds. Rose's invitation to inaugurated mourning – which comes to know and risks uncertain but grounded political action – can open up multiple possibilities

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45. Rose, *The Broken Middle*, p. 159; Rose, *Mourning Becomes the Law*, p. 38.

for coming to better understand and mourn 'what is' in our 'world of many worlds', including interrogating the complexity and brokenness of the dominant world, traversing the middle between worlds, *and* refusing modernity and 'building elsewhere'.

Rose's insistence that we embark on the difficult work of 'recognizing and pressing against what is broken in modern life' already makes her a powerful interlocutor for reckoning with colonialism and the marginalization of non-dominant worlds.[46] Working towards a deeper understanding of the laws and institutions that shape the dominant modern world necessitates interrogating the violence those laws and institutions have enacted not just in the past but in ongoing ways. In the context of modernity, Rose urges us not to remain 'strangers to ourselves as moral agents and as social actors', a sensibility that encourages those of us from the modern world to better understand the damage modernity has wrought not only on others but also on ourselves as we work towards a deeper understanding of our intertwined pasts and present.[47] In the context of settler colonial states, such as Aotearoa New Zealand, coming to better understand ourselves as moral agents and social actors requires collective grappling with difficult histories, land dispossession and cultural suppression, and the continued marginalization of Indigenous ways of being, knowing and acting.[48] Without a deeper understanding of our entangled pasts and present, we

46. Michael Lazarus, 'Economy and State: The Politics of Citizenship and Universality in Gillian Rose, Hannah Arendt and Rosa Luxemburg', *Thesis Eleven*, vol. 186, no. 1, 2025, p. 93, https://doi.org/10.1177/07255136251314511.

47. Gillian Rose, *Judaism and Modernity: Philosophical Essays*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1993, p. 36. See also Kate Schick, 'From Ambivalence to Vulnerability: Recognition and the Subject', *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour*, vol. 52, no. 4, 2022, pp. 595–608, https://doi.org/10.1111/jtsb.12351.

48. Pounamu Jade William Emery Aikman, 'Indigenous Rights: Colonial Chimera? The Illusion of Positive Peace in a Settler Colonial Context', in *The Palgrave Handbook of Positive Peace*, ed. Katerina Standish et al., Springer, Singapore, 2022, https://doi.org/10.1007/978–981–16–0969–5_27. Schick, 'From Ambivalence to Vulnerability'; Robbie Shilliam, 'Who Will Provide the West with Therapy?', in Amanda Russell Beattie and Kate Schick, eds, *The Vulnerable Subject: Beyond Rationalism in International Relations*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2013.

do indeed remain 'strangers to ourselves', unwilling to do the difficult work of wrestling with social and political actuality.

Rose's invitation to tarry in the middle can also help us understand and navigate the broken middles that emerge *between* our entangled worlds, which sit always in relation – leading, at times, to exchanges that unravel the edges of modernity in various ways. One prominent example is the bestowal of legal personhood on the Whanganui River, Te Awa Tupua, in Aotearoa New Zealand in 2017. This remarkable achievement was hard won after over a century of struggle by the Whanganui iwi (local Māori tribe) on behalf of the river and offers the river 'significant protections' as well as 'opening the law up to far more dynamic and creative processes than have previously been available to it'.[49] The recognition of the river as a living entity – as an ancestor to mana whenua, people of the land – represents an unravelling at the edge of the dominant world in Aotearoa. The 140-year struggle by local iwi and hapū brought 'into relationship two incommensurable logics: their own knowledge of the river as kin and the view of nature as property that in part constitutes modernity'.[50] The hard-won protections are a partial victory in that they remain firmly located within a capitalist framework. However, in bringing together the two worlds via this legal struggle, the local iwi was able to 'make visible that which was invisible, namely their relationship with the river, and more fundamentally, the world which this relationship in part enacts'.[51]

Finally, a Rosean sensibility can also help to think about responses that *refuse* modernity and seek instead to 'build else-where', noting that such endeavours must not be understood as apolitical attempts to build anew but as deeply political returns to engagement in worlds already richly populated with laws

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49. Barber, 'Māori Mārx', p. 70.
50. FitzGerald, *Care and the Pluriverse*, p. 10.
51. Ibid.

and institutions. The concept of the pluriverse understands the world as comprising many worlds sitting *in relation* to each other. Worlds-in-relation cannot be subsumed into a Eurocentric one-world vision that simply includes other ways of knowing, being and acting. There must be room for building elsewhere in ways that centre, uphold and celebrate different onto-epistemologies – to think and act otherwise is to continue to 'refuse, extinguish or flatten other modes of life'.[52] In a conversation about Indigenous refusal practices, Leanne Betasamosake Simpson highlights the limitations of justice-oriented practices that centre 'inclusion and recognition' and fail to make meaningful structural change. In response, Simpson argues that Indigenous peoples need not only to 'refuse the violence of the colonial world' but 'also to build and maintain scaffoldings of care for our communities'. Building scaffoldings of care can take the form of 'temporary spaces of joy and freedom' within the existing state; they can also take place elsewhere, outside existing state structures.[53]

Audra Simpson's ethnography of Mohawk nationhood and citizenship speaks to the thoroughgoing refusal of the Kahnawà:ke who have '*refused* the authority of the state at almost every turn'. Instead of returning to the city and engaging with damaging state laws and institutions, the Kahnawà:ke have built alternative, community-led institutions 'structured in the present space of intracommunity recognition, affection and care, outside of the logics of colonial and imperial rule'.[54] This approach centres collectivity and institution-building – it is deeply political and engaged – but does so in a way that refuses the harm of settler colonial structures and honours the ways of being and knowing that characterize the Kahnawà:ke world.

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52. Barber, 'Māori Mārx', p. 71.
53. Leanne Betasamosake Simpson and Dionne Brand, 'Temporary Spaces of Joy and Freedom', *Literary Review of Canada*, vol. 26, no. 5, 2018.
54. Simpson, 'On Ethnographic Refusal: Indigeneity, "Voice" and Colonial Citizenship', *Junctures: The Journal for Thematic Dialogue* 9, 2007, pp. 73 and 76.

Rosean politics

Rose's invitation to 'begin in the middle' invites a sensibility that can help us to navigate our multiple world, be it via returns, exchange and/or refusal. These different forms of political engagement will inevitably be fraught with missteps, misrecognition and failure as they work toward better understanding and better justice. Rather than be paralysed by the fear of getting things wrong, however, a Rosean sensibility encourages us to 'begin in the middle', to take the risk of coming to know our complex relational and political actuality, and to start from there.

For me personally, reading Rose from Aotearoa invites a deeper understanding of the histories that have shaped that land and the ongoing colonial encounter that suppresses Te Ao Māori, the Indigenous world, and that buttresses the modern state. It invites an interrogation of Aotearoa's institutions in light of these entangled worlds – our parliamentary structures, laws, schools and universities, our economy and property rights – and asks: whose worlds are reflected in these institutions and whose interests are served? Reading Rose has encouraged me, as a settler with long history in Aotearoa, on my own journey of interrogation, as I have come to better understand the ways that I am 'implicated in and benefit from' a history of colonial dispossession.[55] I continue to wrestle with what this means for how and what I teach as I attend to the politics of my discipline, my institution and the academy. Reading Rose encourages me to see the classroom as a site of political engagement in which I take pedagogical risks despite the inevitability of getting things wrong. Reading Rose encourages me to stay in the fray – and to despair not.

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55. Shilliam, 'Who Will Provide the West with Therapy?'

7

Our mutual entanglements: Gillian Rose and the critical theory of fascism

LOUIS HARTNOLL

It is an unfortunate problem of modern history that the necessity to think fascism is insistently cyclical. This essay revisits, contextualizes and presents an interpretation of Gillian Rose's scattered late interventions into the theory of fascism as a partial analysis of one such cycle. It has two principal aims.

Taking cues from some recent scholarship on Rose,[1] the first of these probes at the commonplace sketch of Rose's oeuvre that separates it into two distinct phases: an early, critical-theoretical phase, in which she established herself as one of the first anglophone commentators on Theodor W. Adorno, an ardent critic of sociological reason and a thinker concerned with producing a 'critical Marxism'; and a late phase, characterized by her turn to the religious and the theological as well as to questions of 'faith, inwardness and an ethic of singularity'.[2] According to such a division, which I will grant is not without some general interpretative merit, particularly with respect to splits within

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1. For one account of the division and an argument for troubling it, see Adrian Wilding, 'Review of Gillian Rose, *Marxist Modernism: Introductory Lectures on Frankfurt School Critical Theory*', *Historical Materialism*, available online: www.historicalmaterialism.org/gillian-rose-marxist-modernism-introductory-lectures-on-frankfurt-school-critical-theory; accessed 3 September 2025.
2. Tony Gorman, 'Gillian Rose and the Project of a Critical Marxism', *Radical Philosophy* 105, January/February 2001, pp. 25–36; here p. 25.

the Rose reception and scholarship, the earlier of these two phases runs until the publication of *Dialectic of Nihilism* in 1984, or thereabouts, and the second from around 1990 through to her death in 1995. My counterproposition here is that in her late interventions historical circumstance encouraged Rose not only to extend and deepen her trenchant critique of the critique of representation and to renew her sustained attacks on poststructuralist thought, but also to reappraise key philosophical, sociological and psychoanalytic concepts and ideas developed, principally, by Adorno and Walter Benjamin. Rather than announcing a high point of her second phase, then, *The Broken Middle* from 1991 might rather be read as part of a series of interconnected texts through which Rose re-evaluates the actualities and shortcomings of the critical-theoretical tradition that so overtly influenced her early work.

If this first aim proposes a way in which we can situate Rose's late interventions in the theory of fascism within her broader trajectory, the second proposes to interpret the content of such interventions as outlining a sustained critique of the modern liberal subject. Whilst her late work on fascism is now most widely circulated and utilized for her searing criticisms of 'Holocaust piety' – a term she introduces to characterize the trite representation of historical Fascism and a memorialization of Auschwitz which seeks to mystify the catastrophe rather than understand it[3] – their central thrust, as I develop here, mobilizes a turn to 'aesthetics' and 'aestheticization' as a way of

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3. I follow Rose's lead in her capitalizing the word 'fascism' when referring to its historical mid-century manifestations and leaving it in lower case when referring to it as an ongoing sociopolitical current. Further, I follow the reasoning offered by Enzo Traverso in here opting for 'Auschwitz' as the most appropriate term to employ as a metonym for 'Hitler's murderous system'. Avoiding 'Holocaust' because of its overly theological intonation and 'Shoah' because of its ideological functionalization, the term 'Auschwitz' has the advantage, Traverso suggests, in so far as it 'recognises the specificity of the Jewish genocide without isolating it, since it refers at the same time to the broader context of the world of the Nazi concentration camps'. Enzo Traverso, *Understanding the Nazi Genocide: Marxism After Auschwitz*, trans. Peter Drucker, Pluto Press, London, 1999, p. 8.

focusing her exposition of the confluence of the liberal subject with fascism. When Rose thus inserts herself into 'the battle over Benjamin',[4] presenting what she claimed to be a synthetic interpretation of his oeuvre, her proper ambitions are rather to position Benjamin as a thinker of post-Protestant, Counter-Reformation subjectivity and its violent, affective structure. And with the turn to aesthetic concerns, with the realization that she had to rethink narrative and cultural representation, she developed an exposition of an emergent liberal–fascist psychological 'type'. In doing so, she covertly and critically rehabilitates the mid-century psychological, sociological and philosophical model that Adorno and his colleagues advanced.

Whilst I offer no pretence that Rose's essays are an adequate analysis of contemporary sociopolitical fascist tendencies and no suggestion, either, that they should be defended without qualification or that they evade critical scrutiny,[5] we cannot countenance the view that they essentially amount to 'an anti-fascist cultural politics that is more concerned with attacking liberal and moral social consciousness than fascism itself', as Tony Gorman suggests.[6] Such an interpretation not only misconstrues that Rose's turn to cultural and aesthetic concerns is not a terminus but a route into a more incisive theory of fascism and its resistance; it also misconstrues Rose's basic position that liberalism,

4. Gillian Rose, *Marxist Modernism: Introductory Lectures on Frankfurt School Critical Theory*, ed. Robert Lucas Scott and James Gordon Finlayson, Verso, London, 2024, lecture four.

5. In an interview, Alberto Toscano identifies some of the shortcomings of Rose's account: 'in explicitly delinking fascism from questions of imperialism, Orientalism, and class in the closing pages of her chapter ['Beginnings of the Day'], I think she misses the profound and complex entanglements of fascist subjectivities and individualisms – especially those of a petty sovereign straddling the border or frontier between legitimate and non-legitimate – with the history and structure of colonial racial capitalism.' Alberto Toscano in Edwin Nasr and Lama El Khatib, 'Aspects of Evil: A Conversation with Alberto Toscano', *Makhzin* 4, January 2024, special issue on 'Counterlexicons', available online: www.makhzin.org/issues/counterlexicons/aspects-of-evil-a-conversation-with-alberto-toscano; accessed 3 September 2025. My thanks to Rosie Woodhouse for directing me to Toscano's comments.

6. Anthony Gorman, 'Gillian Rose's Critique of Violence', *Radical Philosophy* 197, 2016, pp. 25–35; here p. 26.

even if analytically distinct, is a precursor to and entirely confluent with fascism.[7] Her attack on liberalism and the liberal subject, both of which she understands herself to be objectively imbricated with, is thus not a distraction from the attack on fascism but a necessary component of it. In turning to Rose's late essays, what we find and should seek to recover is a provisional critical-theoretical framework that sought to undermine liberal accounts of the preconditions of fascism, a set of arguments that ask us to abandon the false theoretical dualisms that separate those free of fascist tendencies from those contaminated by them, a barbed attempt to have us reject any propensity to melancholic resignation, and a heuristic that presses us to explore 'our mutual entanglements' – the guiding idea of all Rose's interventions, with cyclical fascist social impulses and tendencies.[8]

The new seizure of power

As it presented itself to Rose in the early 1990s, in post-Thatcher Britain, the problem of fascist resurgence was essentially conditioned by a combined set of political, cultural and theoretical contingencies. Politically, the dominant issues that determined the field were marked by the reunification of Germany, the disintegration of the Soviet Union, and the swelling organized and successful far-right political currents. In Rose's view, such transformations in the political field both required and facilitated the thinking of fascism, as she notes in the introduction to *The Broken Middle*:

> The Revolution in the revolutions of 1989 has not 'destroyed' Marxism so much as it has dismantled post-war state-Socialism. We have been given back the last two hundred years – in life and

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7. See, for instance, Ishay Landa, *The Apprentice's Sorcerer: Liberal Tradition and Fascism*, Brill, Leiden and Boston MA, 2010.
8. Gillian Rose, 'Introduction', in *Mourning Becomes the Law*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1996, pp. 1–14; here p. 13.

in letters. All the debates, all the antinomies of modern state and society addressed since Hobbes, Smith and Rousseau, have been re-opened as well as the opportunity to resume examination of the connection between liberalism and Fascism from which post-war state-Socialism has proved such a dangerous distraction.[9]

With the collapse of the Warsaw Pact and the opening of various archives, so too emerged a cultural reckoning with the histories of Fascism, work that Rose found herself directly involved in. As she writes in *Love's Work*, she accepted an invitation to join 'a number of Jewish "intellectuals" chosen to advise the Polish Commission on the Future of Auschwitz'.[10] Though it is clear she took much from the experience, not least the opportunity to critically engage with Robert Jan van Pelt's scholarship on the architectural and infrastructural design of the Auschwitz camp;[11] it was also an invitation, one suspects, that Rose partially regretted. In her musings on the official visit to Poland and the work of memorialization, she thus remarks:

> What vain posturing! Scientific status, superimposed on the even more dubious notions of cerebral and cultural ethnic identity! We were set up. Enticed to preen ourselves as consultants, in effect, our participation was staged. Conscripted to restructure the meaning of 'Auschwitz', we were observed rather than observing, the objects of continuous Holocaust ethnography, of Holocaust folk law and lore.[12]

Theoretically, Rose's interventions are best viewed as occurring in the wake of the *Historikerstreit*, the highly inflammatory 1980s German debates concerning the historical incomparability and uniqueness of Auschwitz as well as the varying philosophical, theological and sociological arguments for or against such incomparability.[13] Rather than adopting, affirming and advancing

9. Gillian Rose, *The Broken Middle: Out of Our Ancient Society*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1992, p. xi.

10. Gillian Rose, *Love's Work*, Chatto & Windus, London, 1995, p. 8.

11. See, for instance, ibid., pp. 84 ff.; and Gillian Rose, 'Architecture after Auschwitz', in *Judaism and Modernity: Philosophical Essays*, Verso, London, 2017, pp. 241–57.

12. Rose, *Love's Work*, p. 8.

13. See her various comments on Jürgen Habermas, Emil Fackenheim and Zygmunt

a position within this, Rose's contribution was to identify, with the help of the psychoanalytic notion of resistance, an antinomy that separated the knowable from the ineffable, an antinomy that she took to stunt the basic terms of the debate. That is, neither should we remain content with the trivializing or vulgarizing depictions of Auschwitz that we commonly find in popular film, depictions that leave us reassured in our safe, projected subject positions, nor should we insist on mystifying it as something beyond the realms of knowing. The task, rather, is to navigate the shortcomings of representability without succumbing to the pitfalls of those positions that advance representation's total critique. Thus, remarking on Jürgen Habermas's claim that 'Auschwitz altered the conditions for the continuation of historical life contexts – and not only in Germany',[14] Rose asserts that this 'passage from Habermas indicates a trauma, a loss of trust in human solidarity, that marks the epoch which persists. In this way, the search for a decent response to those brutally destroyed is conflated with the quite different response called for in the face of the "inhuman" capacity for such destruction. To argue for silence, prayer, the banishment equally of poetry and knowledge, in short, the witness of "ineffability", that is, non-representability, is to mystify something we dare not understand, because we fear that it may be all too understandable, all too continuous with what we are – human, all too human.'[15]

In so far as she does not produce a systematized socio-critical account of its origins and actuality, in so far as she forgoes a complete analysis of historical and contemporary manifestations,

Bauman in Gillian Rose, 'The Future of Auschwitz', in *Judaism and Modernity*, pp. 33–6; and Gillian Rose, 'Beginnings of the Day – Fascism and Representation', in *Mourning Becomes the Law: Philosophy and Representation*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1996, pp. 41–62.

14. Jürgen Habermas, 'Historical Consciousness and Post-Traditional Identity: The Federal Republic's Orientation to the West', in *The New Conservatism: Cultural Criticism and the Historians' Debate*, trans. Sherry Weber Nicholsen, MIT Press, Cambridge MA, 1989, pp. 249–67; here p. 252.

15. Rose, 'Beginnings of the Day', p. 43.

Rose's claims and insights do not coalesce into a 'theory' of fascism or its recurrent tendencies.[16] Her ambition, rather, was to pursue a set of ideas that arose through an assessment of the historical transition from an 'endemic fascism' of the post-war period to its 'new seizure of power'.[17] At the centre of these interventions, which occupy a significant portion of her late work, lay a rather remarkable turn in her writing towards 'aesthetic' concerns. Such is promised the reader of Rose in her short remarks contributing to 'The Future of Auschwitz' symposium in May 1990 in which she states that recent '"aesthetic" explorations of implication need to be developed and completed by critical reflection. Philosophical reflection and sociological analysis return us, however, to aesthetic questions, questions of representation.'[18] She thus turns to a reassessment of narrative works of twentieth-century film and literature as well as to questions of cultural remembrance and architectural theory as the primary avenues for assessing the dominant fascist tendencies of her own moment. Rose, I believe, saw in 'aesthetic' questions and found in works of film and literature a problematic that could, if adequately examined, draw the theories of fascism out of the impasse into which she believed it had fallen, troubling liberal, subjective gratuitous complacency and the dirempted juridical categories of guilt and innocence, a dialectic of mutual imbrication that she believed overdetermines our thought. Among the first and most significant attempt at this is her highly unorthodox revisionist interpretation of Benjamin.

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16. In the sense demanded in, for instance, Reinhard Kühnl, 'Problems of a Theory of German Fascism: A Critique of the Dominant Interpretation', trans. Anson G. Rabinbach, *New German Critique* 4, Winter 1975, pp. 26–50.

17. Rose, 'Beginnings of the Day', p. 59.

18. Rose, 'The Future of Auschwitz', p. 34. It is conceivable that in this statement Rose (and certainly some of those listening to her) also had in mind Saul Friedlander's conference on the question of Fascism and representation, which had taken place at UCLA just a week prior. For a collection of the papers presented, see Saul Friedlander, ed., *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the 'Final Solution'*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA, 1992.

Incomplete mourning and unending melancholy

Let us begin where Rose concludes. In the closing lines of her essay on the significance of Judaic categories in Benjamin's thought, Rose offers 'three, potentially disturbing theses: that Benjamin's account of the origin of Fascism is contained in his exploration of seventeenth-century Baroque drama; that our tendency to melancholy, however intellectual and passive, is violent; that Benjamin analyses, or breaks down, but he also fixes what he discerns.'[19] For readers of the *Origin of the German Trauerspiel*, the pertinence of his analysis of early modern drama to the theory of historical Fascism will likely be hardly evident. To arrive at her theses, the first two of which I will focus on, Rose's reconstruction relies on interpretative-philosophical manoeuvres that situate Benjamin within a rather atypical line of thought in order to draw out certain features and ideas in his corpus.

Initially, then, Rose constructs a tradition that treated, as she writes, 'the *unintended psychological and political consequences* of Protestant *Innerlichkeit* (inwardness) and worldly asceticism'.[20] In her characteristically truncated sweep through intellectual history, Rose here places Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, G.W.F. Hegel, Søren Kierkegaard and Max Weber in an 'agon of authorship'[21] whose work is jointly understood to pursue the socio-subjective transformation of the Protestant doctrine of salvation into a twofold 'hypertrophy of the inner life' and 'atrophy of political participation'.[22] In recognition of historical secularization and competing Catholic doctrine in Europe, Rose charts a diminishing belief in the Protestant notion of salvation whilst the inner anxiety associated with it is maintained – both of which combine 'with worldly opportunism and ruthlessness';

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19. Gillian Rose, 'Walter Benjamin – Out of the Sources of Modern Judaism', in *Judaism and Modernity*, pp. 175–210; here p. 190.
20. Ibid., p. 180.
21. Rose, *The Broken Middle*, p. 173.
22. Rose, 'Walter Benjamin – Out of the Sources of Modern Judaism', p. 180.

a heady 'combination of anxiety and ruthlessness amounts to the combination of inner and outer violence'.[23] This is a suffering that cannot comprehend its loss and thus compensates through a violent externalization. As Gorman correctly identifies, Rose is here not so much interested in the Protestant moment in the historical genesis of modernity as she is in maintaining 'that the significance of the Protestant Reformation does not lie in the event itself, but rather in its aftermath'.[24] In essence, that is, she looks to construct and extend a line of thought that interrogates the politics of post-Protestant modernity, inflected through the moment of the Counter-Reformation and within which she locates Benjamin.

Though Rose's essay is ostensibly an interpretation of Benjamin's entire oeuvre, taking in everything from 'the early philosophical fragments and short essays to the *Arcades* work and to the so-called theses on the concept of history',[25] her reconstruction of his thought is one properly predicated on three textual centres: 'Toward the Critique of Violence', *Origin of the German Trauerspiel* and the 'Work of Art' essay. More specifically, Benjamin's famous concluding claims in the last that fascism practises 'the aestheticizing of politics'[26] is, in Rose's hands, a hermeneutic through which to retroactively reframe his work as an extended treatment on the concept and actuality of divine violence, sovereignty, the rule of law and, ultimately, what she terms 'the Baroque ethic and the Spirit of Fascism'. Where Rose had, in her 1970s lectures, positioned Benjamin's work on the German *Trauerspiel* as offering the pre-Marxist origins

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23. Ibid.
24. Gorman, 'Gillian Rose's Critique of Violence', p. 27.
25. Rose, 'Walter Benjamin – Out of the Sources of Modern Judaism', p. 184.
26. Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility (Second Version)', in *Selected Writings*, Volume 3: *1935–1938*, trans. Edmund Jephcott and Harry Zohn, ed. Michael W. Jennings and Howard Eiland, Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA, 2002, pp. 101–33; here p. 122. Tellingly but not surprisingly, Benjamin's counterclaim that to fascism, '[c]ommunism responds by politicising art' (ibid.) is entirely absent from Rose's considerations.

of his theory of reification via the concept of allegory, she now positions this work as a post-Weberian treatment of a fundamental shift in the religiously inflected historical structure and character of experience as it proceeds from Protestantism and the Counter-Reformation through to French Catholicism and Jewish modernity. Through this sequence, the successive forms of inwardness come to be

> correlated with the transition from *worldly asceticism to worldly aestheticism*, from worldly renunciation to worldly ornamentation (the Baroque ethic of worldly aestheticism persists from the seventeenth century to the twentieth century). They are also correlated with the transition from the end of politics in the spirit of capitalism to aestheticized politics in the spirit of Fascism.[27]

There are at least two supplementary elements to Rose's line of argument that lend it some plausibility, though these are left unremarked upon in the essay. First, we must recall that though the movements were still somewhat nascent and yet to gain popular appeal, the history of European Fascism had some of its earliest eruptive moments just as Benjamin was drafting his *Trauerspiel* work.[28] Given that in Weimar Germany electoral politics often played only an ancillary role in the groundswell of fascist movements in its earliest days, such moments do not necessarily register at the ballot box but are crystallized in open displays of street violence and spectacle, such as the failed Beer Hall Putsch in Munich in November 1923. Even as early as 1924, then, Benjamin would find himself an unwilling observer of Italian Fascist street parades, writing to Gershom Scholem about his witnessing of their 'display of power' in Florence.[29] Second, as

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27. Rose, 'Walter Benjamin – Out of the Sources of Modern Judaism', pp. 180–81.
28. For an interesting overview of the early German reception of Benjamin's *The Origin of the German Trauerspiel* during the Nazi period, see Jane O. Newman, 'Baroque Legacies: National Socialism's Benjamin', in Wolfgang Bialas and Anson Rabinbach, eds, *Nazi Germany and the Humanities: How German Academics Embraced Nazism*, Oneworld, London, 2014, pp. 238–66.
29. Walter Benjamin, letter to Gershom Scholem, 12 October–5 November 1924, in *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin*, trans. Manfred R. Jacobson and Evelyn M. Jacobson,

an art-historical category, there is also some truth to the claim that the baroque occupies a share in the history of Fascism, including within the German context. With its precursors in mid-nineteenth century theories of 'Jesuit style',[30] the early art history of the baroque saw it disregarded as little more than the aesthetic emanations of the late-Renaissance period of decline, beginning in the early sixteenth century, that would usher in a decadent architectural turn towards the peculiar, the unfamiliar, and the extraordinary, to borrow some adjectives from one of Benjamin's prized art historians, Alois Riegl.[31] Indeed, as Evonne Levy has demonstrated, one of the central issues of the study of the baroque in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was the domination of a 'politically overdetermined formalism that had at its centre a socio-political question about the relation of subordinated and coordinated parts',[32] questions that would be given, within the hands of art historians such as Hans Sedlmayr and A.E. Brinckmann, a very particular inflection during Fascist Germany. Even if we must observe that Rose was relatively uninterested in providing sufficient intellectual historical justification for her interpretation and that her notion of aesthetics is one broadly lacking any art-historical determination, it would perhaps be somewhat trivializing to fault Rose for not developing an account of either front, for the aim of her short essay is neither a total reconstruction of Benjamin nor a complete extrapolation of the baroque aesthetic.

What primarily interests Rose is the baroque as the expression of an ethic that partly determines forms of social relations and interpersonal behaviour in post-Protestant modernity. If, that

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ed. Gershom Scholem and Theodor W. Adorno, University of Chicago Press, Chicago IL, 1994, pp. 252–55; here p. 254.

30. Evonne Levy, *Propaganda and the Jesuit Baroque*, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 2004, pp. 28 ff.

31. Alois Riegl, *The Origins of Baroque Art in Rome*, trans. and ed. Andrew Hopkins and Arnold Witte, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles CA, 2010, p. 95.

32. Evonne Levy, *Baroque and the Political Language of Formalism (1845–1945): Burckhardt, Wölfflin, Gurlitt, Brinckmann, Sedlmayr*, Schwabe Verlag, Basel, 2015, p. 311.

is, Weber's sociological account of Protestantism and its various denominations sought to underscore its ethic of worldly asceticism, if it sought to derive an ethic through the social extrapolation of Protestant 'maxims for everyday economic conduct',[33] if it sought to demonstrate the psychological effects of a rationality that abjured temptations of the flesh, Benjamin is here viewed as interrogating the artistic and literary expressions of a subsequent Counter-Reformation ethic of worldly aestheticism. Where, in accordance with an ethic of asceticism, the visual language of Protestantism is articulated through an emphasis on iconoclastic reservation and visual renunciation, the baroque employment of ornamental excess and decorative embrace is thus the historical and stylistic counterpart to an ethic that, following the atrophying of a belief in salvation, 'evinces *a created and creaturely world* with the aspiration but *without the promise of redemption*'.[34] Though Benjamin himself does not quite claim to write such a diagnostic account and readers of his early work would be hard pressed to discover in it much overt reference to Weber,[35] it is true that at the level of self-conception, he understood the analysis undertaken in *Origin of the German Trauerspiel* as treating 'the work of art as an integral expression of the religious, metaphysical, political, and economic tendencies of its age'.[36] Indeed, he even concludes the 'Epistemo-Critical Foreword' – which Rose took to be the centre of a book to which the rest provides an extended introduction – with the suggestion that the historical German baroque contains within it an 'inordinate artistic expression of tendencies related to those of the present

33. Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons, Routledge, London and New York, 2001, p. 102.
34. Rose, 'Walter Benjamin – Out of the Sources of Modern Judaism', p. 181.
35. For an account of the Weberian elements in Benjamin's work, see Elettra Stimilli, 'Gillian Rose, Interpreter of Walter Benjamin: The "Unintended Consequences" of Asceticism', in this present volume.
36. Walter Benjamin, 'Curriculum Vitae (III)', trans. Rodney Livingstone, in *Selected Writings*, Volume 2, Part 1: *1927–1930*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland and Gary Smith, Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA, 2005, pp. 77–9; here p. 78.

day'.[37] In Rose's hands, then, Benjamin's *Trauerspiel* text becomes a contribution to the tendential analysis of a fascist outpouring of spectacular violence and destruction 'derived from the change in the structure of experience – the subjectivity which issues from and responds to the atrophy of substance'.[38]

The brief reference here to the theory of subjectivity is telling, I would suggest, not only of Rose's interpretation of Benjamin, but also of her own broader analysis of fascism's resurgence. Such is to say, when read alongside her contemporaneous essays and interventions, we can see that Rose here is not exclusively concerned with the purported framework of the essay – unearthing the Jewish sources of Benjamin's thought – but with generally situating and enlisting Benjamin into a broader exposition of, as Gorman once phrased it, 'the "untruth" of modern subjectivity'.[39] Hence, whilst Rose's constructive claims in the essay derive from an interpretation of Benjamin's corpus as elaborating on the baroque ethic and the spirit of Fascism (her first 'disturbing thesis'), the critical impetus rather targets the affective tendency of a deficient mourning and protracted melancholy as a complicit, ultimately entangled, subjective response (the content of her second thesis). It is only in this way that we can adequately make sense of Rose's passing remark elsewhere that Benjamin's *Trauerspiel* book offers – in his description of the lack of an eschatology in the baroque, the emptying of the beyond of 'everything in which even the slightest breath of world can be felt', and the configuration of death and the beyond 'as vacuum, in a condition to swallow up the earth one day with catastrophic

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37. Walter Benjamin, *Origin of the German Trauerspiel*, trans. Howard Eiland, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA, 2019, p. 39. As Howard Caygill remarks on this closing claim: 'The connecting theme is of course the development of capitalism, and this is a theme which he will analyse further in the *Arcades Project*. For this reason it is important not artificially to separate the *Origin of the German Mourning Play* from the later work on nineteenth-century capitalism. The two projects are complementary: one analyses the culture of nascent capitalism, the other the culture of high capitalism.' Howard Caygill, *Walter Benjamin: The Colour of Experience*, Routledge, London and New York, 2005, p. 57.
38. Rose, 'Walter Benjamin – Out of the Sources of Modern Judaism', p. 181.
39. Gorman, 'Gillian Rose's Critique of Violence', p. 25.

violence'[40] – one of the most concrete images of a 'political psychology of fascism'.[41] Subtly drawing Benjamin into an extrapolated Freudian psychoanalytic framework,[42] on this account, an incomplete, self-inhibited mourning becomes the lament of unending melancholy as the subjective psychological and behavioural reaction that results from an experience of a world lacking in redemption but abundant in signification. In the baroque ethic, the loss of salvation becomes an unmourned object, lingering as a collective post-Protestant modern melancholic suffering that expresses itself in an outward 'ornamentation without truth' and mobilization of spectacularized violence.[43]

Rose's reappraisal of Benjamin's oeuvre properly marks her earliest significant entry into a critical theory of fascism and establishes much of the overarching narrative and many of the subsisting ideas that will return in her subsequent essays. Indeed, though Benjamin played a role in influencing some of her earliest work and is foregrounded and examined in her lectures, it is not properly until and after this essay that he becomes someone whom Rose thinks with and through. So much so, I would suggest, that *Mourning Becomes the Law* is entirely unthinkable without accounting for the manner in which Benjamin influences her late critique of postmodern thought and the account of fascism contained therein. Furthermore, in attempting to analyse the exigencies of fascism and in examination of Benjamin, Rose finds additional occasion for a return to other resources in the critical-theoretical tradition. The key essay for this and perhaps Rose's most important and best-known singular

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40. Benjamin, *Origin of the German Trauerspiel*, pp. 50–51.
41. Gillian Rose, 'O! untimely death. / Death!', in *Mourning Becomes the Law: Philosophy and Representation*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1996, pp. 125–46; here p. 131.
42. Cf. Gillian Rose, 'The Comedy of Hegel and the *Trauerspiel* of Modern Philosophy', in *Mourning Becomes the Law*, p. 148 n3. For a developed account of the Freud–Benjamin connection, though one which does not draw on Rose, see Betty Schulz, *The Fractured Subject: Walter Benjamin and Sigmund Freud*, Rowman & Littlefield, London, 2023.
43. Rose, 'Walter Benjamin – Out of the Sources of Modern Judaism', p. 189.

contribution to the theory of fascism is 'Beginnings of the Day – Fascism and Representation'. First given as a lecture and then published in *Mourning Becomes the Law*, this essay is prompted by and turns on a comparativist account of Steven Spielberg's 1993 film *Schindler's List* and the reception that it triggered. This is not an essay that, as Gorman once suggested, makes a case 'for an anti-fascist cultural criticism', but designates Rose's most developed turn to film and literature as a means of articulating an anti-fascist political philosophy, her most thoroughgoing attempt at a politicization of aesthetics inflected through a concrete single-figure typology of a liberal–fascist subject and its affective structure.

Typologies of fascism

In one of his contributions to *The Authoritarian Personality*, Adorno mounted a rather remarkable defence of psychological typology, the methodological approach to the study of individuality that identifies and constructs character types.[44] Already by 1950, the year in which the study was published, such a method had been heavily attacked both for allowing the 'unique' to elude it and for producing results that were overly generalized, 'not statistically valid and do not even afford productive heuristic tools'.[45] At once, the critics argued, typology repeats in method a dehumanizing tendency and simplifies, to the point of crude abstraction, highly complex and very particular psychological mechanisms. Adorno's anticipatory response is, of course, a Freudo-Marxist one, arguing, as Rose summarized, that the

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44. Adorno's defence of this is not, however, without much earlier precursors within the Institute for Social Research. Though it would require a more detailed methodological and theoretical comparison, here we may think of the psychoanalytic claims outlined in Erich Fromm, 'Psychoanalytic Characterology and Its Relevance for Social Psychology' (1932), in *The Crisis of Psychoanalysis: Essays on Freud, Marx, and Social Psychology*, Holt, Reinhart & Wilson, New York, 1970, pp. 135–58.

45. Theodor W. Adorno, 'Types and Syndromes', in Theodor W. Adorno et al., *The Authoritarian Personality*, Norton, New York, 1969, pp. 744–83; here p. 744.

'production of value in exchange and the concomitant mode of domination in late capitalism give rise to "typed" behaviour which tends to be generally or universally prevalent'.[46] Types are true not in that they provide a composite, ideal average image that summarizes a group of individuals, but because social standardization compels psychological and behavioural conformity to a rigid and inflexible model. They provide a critical image of stereotypy that results from present social relations. 'People', Adorno states, 'form psychological "classes," inasmuch as they are stamped by variegated social processes.... Individualism, opposed to inhuman pigeonholing, may ultimately become a mere ideological veil in a society which actually *is* inhuman and whose intrinsic tendency towards the "subsumption" of everything shows itself by the classification of people themselves.[47] Importantly, the goal of psychological typology in *The Authoritarian Personality* was not the production of these types as particular images to which individuals correspond, but their construction as an analytic measure of a propensity to standardization, a readiness for narcissistic identification, and a disposition to conformism. Thus, Adorno states:

> Here lies the ultimate principle of our whole typology. Its major dichotomy lies in the question of whether a person is standardized himself and thinks in a standardized way, or whether he is truly 'individualized' and opposes standardization in the sphere of human experience. The individual types will be specific configurations within this general division.[48]

As Rose recounts in her 'introduction' to Adorno's thought,[49] and as she reiterates just one year later in her *Marxist Modernism*

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46. Gillian Rose, *The Melancholy Science: An Introduction to the Thought of Theodor W. Adorno*, Verso, London, 2014.
47. Adorno, 'Types and Syndromes', p. 747.
48. Ibid., p. 749.
49. As Caygill rightly suggests, *The Melancholy Science* is a work that only 'masqueraded as an introduction to the thought of T.W. Adorno'. Much like her 'deceptively not-difficult *Love's Work*', it is incumbent upon readers of *The Melancholy*

lectures, the meaning of Adorno's contributions to *The Authoritarian Personality* could only be grasped if it was seen within the Institute for Social Research's broader ambitions to demonstrate the necessity of thinking fascism with recourse to philosophy, sociology and psychoanalysis. Concretely, this meant to see the study as contiguous with the broader American Jewish Committee's 'Studies in Prejudice' series, with that psychoanalytic approach outlined in essays such as Adorno's 'Freudian Theory and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda', with the 'macro-theory'[50] of antisemitism sketched in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, and, we should add, with the subsequent study of public opinion, *Group Experiment*. Across these various works, Max Horkheimer, Adorno and their Institute colleagues offered prefigurative models and theoretical extrapolations of typological study. Hence, in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, for instance, we find a concept of fascist 'ticket thinking' as part of the production of reactionary conformity, and, in an earlier Horkheimer essay, we read a provisional list of various antisemitic types such as the born antisemite, the religious and philosophical antisemite, the backwoods or 'Sectarian' antisemite, the vanquished competitor, and so on.[51] Though the socio-theoretical complexity of these studies, conducted after the conclusion of the war and within the USA and West Germany, cannot be reduced to a single claim or idea, we should understand them as broadly driving the conviction that fascism was to be thought and studied beyond its historical and geographical limits. Such is to say that these works broke with the view that fascism was a political aberration from

Science to parcel out where Adorno's thought ends and Rose's begins. Howard Caygill, 'Preface', in Gillian Rose, *Paradiso*, Shearsman Books, Bristol, 2015, pp. 7–8.

50. Rose, *The Melancholy Science*, p. 134.

51. See Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Edmund Jephcott, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, Stanford University Press, Stanford CA, 2002, pp. 170–72; and Max Horkheimer, 'Sociological Background of the Psychoanalytic Approach', in *Anti-Semitism: A Social Disease*, ed. Ernst Simmel, International Universities Press, New York, 1946, pp. 1–10.

'democracy', and was rather a socio-political tendency that could subsist within it. As Adorno famously and publicly warned:

> National Socialism lives on, and even today we still do not know whether it is merely the ghost of what was so monstrous that it lingers on after its own death, or whether it has not yet died at all, whether the willingness to commit the unspeakable survives in people as well as in the conditions that enclose them. [...] I consider the survival of National Socialism *within* democracy to be potentially more menacing than the survival of fascist tendencies *against* democracy. Infiltration indicates something objective; ambiguous figures make their comeback and occupy positions of power for the sole reason that conditions favour them.[52]

However, as indicated above, the question as it posed itself to Rose was no longer that of the post-war *survival* of fascism, no longer that it was socially endemic,[53] but that it appeared to be again gaining and seizing power. Under these altered historical circumstances, to ask after the preparedness of individuals to join and support fascist movements, to ask after their propensity towards authoritarianism, Rose thought, would be to assess incorrectly the political problem. It would, as it were, be altogether 'too late'. Instead, Rose's oblique and unarticulated question focused not on propensity but on imbrication. Though this lineage is not openly recognized by Rose and though she had, of course, no comparable empirical project, she is, I would suggest, nonetheless reliant on these early critical-theoretical contributions in her parallel construction of a new 'type' of

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52. Theodor W. Adorno, 'The Meaning of Working through the Past', in *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, trans. Henry W. Pickford, Columbia University Press, New York, 2005, pp. 89–103; here pp. 89–90. For some early thoughts on the place Adorno's interventions had in the burgeoning theory of German Fascism, see Anson G. Rabinbach, 'Toward a Marxist Theory of Fascism and National Socialism: A Report on Developments in West Germany', *New German Critique* 3, Autumn 1974, pp. 127–53.

53. I find Rose's dismissal of theories of 'endemic' fascism as 'all dramatic overstatements, designed to defamiliarize modern familiarities' (Rose, 'Beginnings of the Day', p. 59) highly objectionable. Whilst she is correct to want to underscore the dissimilarities in fascism's relative social and political position, stressing, that is, that we need to produce analytical tools that are adequate to historical shifts, for the sake of analytic clarity she is overly ahistorical in trivializing the contributions made to the theory of fascism and its compact with liberal democracy in the post-war period.

liberal-fascist individual and in her sketches for a theory of ongoing subjective structures of narcissistic identification. In 'Beginnings of the Day', then, Rose's criticism of 'Holocaust piety' provides a way of further determining her philosophical account and critique of modern subjectivity through the quiet rehabilitation of the Institute's basic post-war methods for interrogating fascist tendencies. Thus she addends an emergent type produced by and complicit in neo-fascist seizures of power that she terms the 'ultimate predator', whose sentimentality Spielberg's *Schindler's List*, one of the central filmic and literary focuses of the essay, 'depends on'.[54] Nothing risked and little gained, the 'obscene excess of voyeuristic witness' that permeates this film, the frequent moments of gratuitous, ornamental violence, relies on a strategy of complacent consolation. It is easy, Rose ventures, for viewers of this film to apply their sympathy to the victims of such displays of violence; easy to find it in Manichaean parallels and dualisms embodied in the protagonists; easy, that is, to rehearse that basic diremption of juridical reasoning which separates the guilty from the innocent, only to reassure ourselves that we would never side with evil. She writes:

> Such plasticity of history, such pragmatics of good and evil, such continuity between *the banality of Schindler's benevolence* and the gratuity of Goeth's violence, should mean that the reader, and, *pari passu*, the audience, experience the crisis of identity in their own breasts. Instead, we enjoy vicarious revulsion at the handsome sadist, Goeth, who appears invincible in the film, but is imprisoned much earlier on in the book, and we applaud the *bon-vivant* Schindler in his precarious outwitting of him.[55]

Rose's figure of the 'ultimate predator' enters here as an explanatory type produced by and confluent with manipulated liberal accounts of the historical and moral distance of a Fascist

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54. Rose, 'Beginnings of the Day', p. 47.
55. Ibid., p. 46.

past. This figure, Rose continues, 'can be sentimental about the victimhood of other predators while overlooking that victim's own violent predation; and she may embellish her arbitrary selectivity of compassion in rhapsodies and melodramas'.[56] To read in this some sort of apologetics, a straight inversion of the guilt–innocence juridical paradigm, or an unconventional plea for 'coldness' would be a gross misinterpretation of the claim. In resuming an 'examination of the connection between liberalism and Fascism', as she wrote in *The Broken Middle*, Rose rather seeks to underscore how fascist predation inheres in liberal compassion; how a contingent and manipulable sympathy secures the conditions it appears to abhor. *Schindler's List* renders this cinematic, betraying 'the crisis of ambiguity in characterization, mythologization and identification, because of its anxiety that our sentimentality be left intact. It leaves us at *the beginning of the day*, in a Fascist security of our own unreflected predation, piously joining the survivors putting stones on Schindler's grave in Israel. It should leave us unsafe, but with the *remains of the day*. To have that experience we would have to discover and confront our own fascism.'[57] As she develops, such narrative cultural products thus often produce a post-Fascist historical fantasy in the viewer, in the case of film, or reader, in the case of literature, that reinforces a delusional and gratuitous sense of liberal self-security. We 'good people' cannot imagine that we would have been anything other than on the side of the innocent, not only neglecting the sociological reality of historical Fascism, which was constituently reliant on the support and participation of the liberal bourgeoisie, but also mystifying and exceptionalizing that reality. Structures of identification and narrative empathy therefore often leave 'the identity of the voyeur intact, at a remove from the grievous events which she observes.

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56. Ibid., p. 48.
57. Ibid.

Her self-defences remain untouched, while she may feel *exultant revulsion* or *infinite pity* for those whose fate is displayed.'[58] Here, the representation of Fascism dialectically accords with the fascism of representation, the manner in which culture functions to produce a type that is embroiled in neo-fascist gains in political traction, however much it might feign its innocence. However unsettling this thought might be, in this line of argument Rose implores us to find ourselves as she found herself in the type that she identifies, to catch ourselves as she caught herself in this image of innocuous, nefarious complicity.

To think a generalized fascism through the construction of a socio-psychological type, to locate it in a set of seemingly insipid traits and characteristics, places Rose within a distinct critical-theoretical lineage, which, with some brevity, I have here tried to sketch. As the above suggests, however, she also makes a very distinct departure from this lineage, both refusing to separate herself from the type that she diagnoses and seeking to define where the disruption of self-misrecognition internal to a type could instruct an anti-fascist politics. In Adorno's cautious defence of the Institute's application of the typological method, the productive practical application of the concepts arises in their 'translation', in allowing their crude model of psychological reality, their simplistic classification of character, to illuminate socio-political patterns and relations. However, whilst their methodology repeats reified social relations in order to combat such relations, it also risks rigidifying them. By contrast, Rose's single-figure typology serves different purposes. With the image of the ultimate predator, Rose tries to pose an idea that would allow not only for socioanalytic intervention, but also for correct self-recognition prompted through an experience of subjective crisis. As such, her reintroduction of typology not only occurs, as

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58. Ibid., p. 54.

was true of the 1950s, after it had already been broadly attacked within the disciplines of psychology and sociology, but also after such attacks were functionally successful, all but eliminating this as a viable method. What I mean by this is that Rose's typological intervention draws in the historical critique of it as method in so far as it constructs an analytic type in order to set up its practical-political dissolution. This is to suggest that she adopts it as a methodological approach to begin abandoning it as a methodological necessity. The type that she sets up proposes that we, as her readers, might not only grasp her theoretical constructs and coordinates, but also recognize ourselves as mutually entangled in her critique, as perhaps identifying where we too have succumbed to its baroque allure. Rose's plea for the experience of the crisis of identity, that is, aims not at a figure 'out there' per se, but directly addresses the audience of her lecture and readers of her essay.

What remains?

Rose, we have to admit, cannot be readily adopted by the anti-fascist partisan. Her writing offers little in the way of clear instruction, little of a positive programme that could be straight-forwardly applied to combatting this enduring socio-political tendency. For those reading from the left, returning today to her burgeoning exposition of neo-fascist seizures of power and her diagnostic of its subjective correlates, written through sometimes quite direct, sometimes fairly oblique, reappraisals of the critical-theoretical tradition, is an unsurprisingly 'difficult' endeavour. Such difficulty arises not only because of its 'severe' or 'facetious' style, its employment of heavy abridgement, its severe conceptual compression, its barbed decisive statements, its partial recalcitrance, and its occasional turn to irony, for which Rose's writing is so well known. The difficulty, that is, is

not only of comprehension and interpretation, which we cannot
but acknowledge; it is also a difficulty of meeting Rose's demand
for self-recognition at a moment of political confrontation,
of meeting her demand to induce a crisis in that individual
unable to break with their own – which is our own – complic-
ity. Though we may not find a great deal of 'hope' in such an
account, what we can locate in her caustic critique, and why
we may find resource for returning to her ideas, is the incisive
yet incomplete analytical remains of the impossible conditions
within which and from which we think and act.

BROKEN MIDDLES

8

States of speculation: Gillian Rose's Talmudic Hegel

RACHEL PAFE

Gillian Rose argues that the broken nature of modernity necessitates a return to a speculative Hegel that strongly rebukes poststructuralist thinking of ethics and politics as separate entities. In this article I argue that Rose reads Hegel speculatively through Talmudic law in a manner that both extends and exposes the limits of universal ethics in modern political life.[1]

The Talmud is a corpus of rabbinic Jewish legal interpretation that Rose sees as a legal method, rather than mere religious tradition, for modernity. She understands both Talmudic and Hegelian methods as a 'flawed jurisprudence' characterized by ongoing, speculative and dialectical mediation. I explore the political stakes of Rose's proposal through her critique of Emmanuel Levinas for exemplifying poststructuralism's ethical blunders in a 1982 interview about the Sabra and Shatila massacre in Beirut. I contend that this bears directly on current debates on Rose as a political thinker and the limits of universalist ethics more broadly.

I first introduce Levinas's interview, then outline how Rose's critique of it is linked to her early interpretation of Hegel's idea of the state. I explore how she turns to Talmudic argument as a speculative legal method that echoes her speculative understanding of Hegel, Talmudizing Hegel and Hegalianizing Talmud in the process. Last, I reflect on the wrinkle in the sovereign authority of Hegel's state and a similar one in Rose's approach to the Talmud. I argue that while Rose proposes a fascinating Talmudic Hegel, her speculative reconciliation reaches its limit when it comes to the tension between a quasi-universal ethical law and the particular authority of a statist or divine legal order. In this space lives the violence of the state.

The debate on Levinas's interview

On 14 September 1982 a bomb went off in the East Beirut headquarters of Lebanese president Bashir Gemayel, killing him and twenty-six others. The following day the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) occupied West Beirut, to prevent a further escalation and secure Shia Muslims from Christian Phalangists, but actually introduced Phalangists into Palestinian refugee camps. The Christian soldiers massacred several hundred people in the Sabra and Shatila camps over nearly two days; the IDF did not intervene. An independent commission run by assistant to Secretary General of the United Nations Séan Macbride concluded that the massacre was a form of genocide and that the IDF bore responsibility. [2]

On 28 September 1982 Levinas did an interview on Radio Communauté in which Sabra and Shatila was discussed. The interviewer asks: 'Emmanuel Levinas, you are the philosopher of

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2. Séan McBride et al., 'Israel in Lebanon: Report of the International Commission to Enquire into Reported Violations of International Law by Israel during Its Invasion of Lebanon', *Journal of Palestine Studies*, vol. 12, no. 3, Spring 1983, pp. 117–33, www.jstor.org/stable/2536156.

the "other". Isn't history, isn't politics the very site of the encounter with the "other", and for the Israeli, isn't the "other" above all the Palestinian?' Levinas responds:

> The other is the neighbour, who is not necessarily kin, but who can be. And in that sense, if you're for the other, you're for the neighbour. But if your neighbour attacks another neighbour or treats him unjustly, what can you do? Then alterity takes on another character, in alterity we can find an enemy, or at least then we are faced with the problem of knowing who is right and who is wrong, who is just and who is unjust. There are people who are wrong.[3]

This interview sparked a fierce debate.[4] Oona Eisenstadt and Claire Katz describe its contours as 'a progression by which [Martin] Jay suggests, [Howard] Caygill argues, and [Judith] Butler assumes that Levinas's words in the interview, and his thought as a whole, are tainted by an ethnic or national parochialism that violates the terms of his ethics'.[5] In contrast, Eisenstadt and Katz counter that for Levinas the face of the other is a transcendental device, not a concrete political reality. With the exception of Bettina Bergo's exegesis in *Levinas Between Politics and Ethics*,[6] Rose is mostly absent from the critical reception of Levinas's interview that began in the early 1980s and still continues.

Rose responds to Levinas's interview in the last chapter of *The Broken Middle* in the 'Ethics and Halacha' subsection; *halacha* meaning Jewish law.[7] She critiques Levinas on the basis of his argument for an ethics separated from politics. Arguments that

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3. 'Ethics and Politics', in *The Levinas Reader*, ed. Sean Hand, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1991, p. 294.

4. For a summary and deepening of this debate, see Elad Lapidot*, State of Others: Levinas and Decolonial Israel*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington IN, 2025.

5. Oona Eisenstadt and Claire Elise Katz, 'The Faceless Palestinian: The History of an Error', *Telos* 174, Spring 2016, pp. 9–32, doi:10.3817/0316174009, p. 9.

6. Bettina Bergo, *Levinas Between Politics and Ethics: For the Beauty that Adorns the Earth*, Springer, Dordrecht, 1999.

7. For more on Gillian Rose's connections with modern Jewish thought, see Elliot Wolfson, *Nocturnal Seeing: Hopelessness of Hope and Philosophical Gnosis in Susan Taubes, Gillian Rose, and Edith Wyschogrod*, Stanford University Press, Stanford CA, 2024.

Levinas's ethics are a transcendental device rather than grounded in politics miss the point for Rose; his ethics should be grounded. She sees Sabra and Shatila in this context as an example of the violence that arises when the political is not thought together with the ethical. This calls for a speculative Hegelian model that brings the ethical and the legal back together in mediation.

Law, the state and the absolute: Rose and Hegel via Levinas

Levinas describes Hegelian dialectics as 'a radical denial of the rupture between the ontological and the ethical'.[8] This is indicative of his broader critique of Hegel as the main face of a philosophical tradition that has prioritized ontology over the ethical Other.[9] While this is also aimed at Heidegger, Levinas's accusation of the premissing of being over ethics is mainly directed at an imagined Hegelian totality and unity. For Rose this violent totality is precisely the problem that Levinas enacts through his separation of ethics and politics.

Rose lays the groundwork for this critique in *Hegel Contra Sociology* (1981), embodied in the statement that 'Hegel's philosophy has no social import if the absolute cannot be thought.'[10] Rose argues that breakdowns of social reason in modern social theory can be traced back to Kant's separation of theoretical and practical reason. Marx, Durkheim and Weber draw attention to the socio-historical possibilities of particular theoretical and social disciplines and practices.[11] Yet each does so, Rose contends, by appealing to a transcendent condition to explain spheres of social reality, a mistake repeated by thinkers ranging from

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8. Robert Bernasconi, 'Hegel and Levinas: The Possibility of Forgiveness and Reconciliation', in Claire Katz and Laura Trout, eds, *Emmanuel Levinas: Leading Assessments of Critical Philosophers*, Routledge, London, 2005, p. 50.
9. Ibid., p. 49.
10. Gillian Rose. *Hegel Contra Sociology*, Verso, London, 2009, pp. 45, 98, 218, 223.
11. See Anthony Gorman, 'Gillian Rose and the Project of a Critical Marxism', *Radical Philosophy* 105, January/February 2001.

Adorno and Horkheimer to Heidegger. They all overlook Hegel's model of the absolute, as outlined in his *Logic*, as not a static concept but a process. Rose writes:

> The idea of phenomenology can be seen as an alternative to Kant's theoretical *quaestio quid juris*, while the idea of absolute ethical life can be seen as an alternative to Kant's justification of moral judgements. This, however, would be to concede the Kantian dichotomy between theoretical and practical reason. The idea of all Hegel's thought is to unify theoretical and practical reason. In his *Logic*, as in all his works, the unification is achieved by a phenomenology and the idea of absolute ethical life.[12]

Rose underlines that this process of mediation operates through dialectical contradiction in which poles such as abstract and universal, theoretical and practical, are not opposites but rather parts of an unfolding whole. Furthermore, 'If the absolute cannot be pre-judged but must be achieved, it must be always present *and* have a history.'[13] The speculative method outlined in Hegel's *Logic* unfolds in various ways the absolute's historicity in concrete spheres such as the state, its laws and its mediating institutions. Here phenomenology becomes visible, as 'a series of shapes of consciousness', within absolute ethical life.[14] This present and this history are underlined by an understanding of the individual as an implicated site of contradictions of dialectical consciousness with a broader societal whole.[15]

Rose traces the absolute throughout Hegel's work, arguing that 'Absolute ethical life is more explicit in the political writings than in other writings. In the *Philosophy of Right* this is because the other illusions which made Hegel despair of any reunification of political and religious life are not prominent.' These

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12. Rose, *Hegel Contra Sociology*, p. 48.
13. Ibid., p. 50.
14. Ibid.
15. For a discussion of how this connects to feminist interpretations of Hegel such as those by Judith Butler, Rebecca Comay and Catherine Malabou, see the episode of the *Why Theory* podcast 'Hegel & Feminism', 11 November 2024.

writings most clearly expose their unifying propositions and reveal a 'lack of unity in political life'.[16]

In his *Philosophy of Right* Hegel introduces the state as a conceptual model of ethical life rather than a particular historical example.[17] In this context he outlines family as an immediate ethical relation, civil society as the site of individual rights and economic interests, and the state as the broader ethical whole in which the tensions between these two realms are superseded. The state both negates the private particularism of civil society via a universal good and conserves individual autonomy via individual freedom. Freedom within this context is found in the communal form within the state, linking internal individual freedom and external freedom as the dialectical realization of concrete universality. Through this motion, both universal good and individual freedom are elevated.

The transition from the family, horde, clan or multitude into the state constitutes the formal realization of it in the idea. If the ethical substance, which every people has implicitly, lacks this form, it is without that objectivity which comes from laws and thought-out regulations. It has neither for itself nor for any others a universal or generally admitted reality.[18]

Law undergirds the social and political institutions that rationally enact both right and morality. As such, they give objective and rational form to ethics. If 'the ethical substance … lacks this form' of the state, ethics remains implicit and incapable of reaching either a universal status or 'generally admitted reality'. Law gives the structure for ethics to enter both universal form and general reality of the people.

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16. Rose, *Hegel Contra Sociology*, pp. 54, 53.
17. See Terry Pinkard, 'Should Hegelian Philosophy Jettison the Absolute? Hegel's Political Philosophy Two-hundred Years Later', *Crisis & Critique,* vol. 1, no. 2, 2021, pp. 307–27, www.crisiscritique.org/storage/app/media/2021–12–13/cc-82–terry-pinkard.pdf.
18. G.W.F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, trans. S.W. Dyde, Dover, New York, 2005, p. 202.

Hegel goes on to write that 'In the same way civilized nations may treat as barbarians the people who are behind them in the essential elements of the state. Thus, the rights of mere herdsman, hunters, and tillers of the soil are inferior, and their independence is merely formal.'[19] This contention that some states and their laws are left behind in the progression of the Spirit is part of a broader critique that in *Philosophy of Right* Hegel deifies the Prussian state, rejects democratic politics in favour of the fixed societal position of a monarchy and underlines a providential and reconciliatory history that leads to the Germanic people.[20] On the contrary, Rose sees *Philosophy of Right* as 'a speculative (dis)guise' both rejecting reconciliation and seeking to overthrow bourgeois property law:

> Hegel is stressing, in opposition to liberal natural law, that the institutions which appear most 'natural' and 'immediate' in any society, such as the family or the sphere of needs, presuppose an overall economic and political organization which may not be immediately intelligible. Unfortunately, the mistakes of natural consciousness which Hegel was exposing have frequently been attributed to him.[21]

In Rose's interpretation, accusations of quietism or defending the status quo miss Hegel's broader critique of idealist naturalist law. Absolute ethical life is contrasted with the relative ethical life of modern bourgeois society in the 'illusions of natural consciousness'. If Kant only understands such institutions as forms of the natural will in an abstract morality, and Fichte in terms of the fixed laws of civil society, Hegel presents its contradictions and thus '[t]he discrepancy between the natural will's definition and its experience, the social reality presupposed by the

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19. Ibid., p. 202.
20. For a summary of these debates, see Robert Pippin, 'Introduction', in Robert Pippin and Otfried Höffe, eds, *Hegel on Ethics and Politics*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2004.
21. Rose, *Hegel Contra Sociology*, p. 54.

definition, itself transforms the inequity'.[22] This, Rose underlines, is a speculative interrogation of the state's contradictions that aims to transform them. Such an understanding foreshadows her eventual idea of an ethical 'broken middle', which I will unpack in the following section.

In Rose's introduction to *The Broken Middle* she underlines the continuing issue of philosophical and sociological disjunction outlined in *Hegel Contra Sociology*. 'Made anxious by such inscrutable disjunctions, we invariably attempt to mend them, as will become evident, with love, forced or fantasized into the state.'[23] For Rose, such a forced mending of the state leads to exactly the illusions that Hegel cautions against. As I will explore in her analysis of Levinas's response to Sabra and Shatila, that understanding of the state has violent consequences. A return to Hegel is not only relevant, but urgent.[24]

Rose's Talmudic Hegel

The Talmud is a corpus of wide-ranging commentaries and debates about Jewish law, or *halacha*. It is based on the Hebrew Bible, whose interpretations were written down in 70 CE following the Hebrew people's diaspora. This first comprised the Mishnah (200 CE); a commentary on the Mishnah known as the Gemara was then compiled based on the Palestinian Talmud (400 CE) and the Babylonian Talmud (500 CE). The Babylonian Talmud became the authoritative version; the main rabbinic

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22. Ibid., p. 91.
23. Gillian Rose, *The Broken Middle: Out of Our Ancient Society*, Blackwell, Hoboken NJ, 1992, p. xii.
24. Vincent Lloyd makes a similar argument, noting both that Rose's early work on Hegel led to her engagements with Jewish law and that the debate between law and ethics is not just a Jewish problem, but relevant for a broader modernity. Vincent Lloyd, 'Law all the Way Down', in Joshua B. David, ed., *Misrecognitions: Gillian Rose and the Task of Political Theology*, Cascade Books, Eugene OR, 2018, pp. 300–337. I return to Lloyd's reflections on the limits of speculative reconciliation towards the end of the article. For a critique of how Lloyd approaches universality in Rose's thought via his stance on identity politics, see my forthcoming article for *Political Theology*'s 2026 special edition on Susan Taubes.

commentaries included in its printed text were written until around the thirteenth century, with continued emphasis on interpretation of Jewish law in varying communities in the diaspora.[25]

The Talmud's hermeneutic method is known as *Mishnah*, rooted in this history of continuous rabbinic commentary in which the law is perpetually debated and never final. On the one hand, this is bound up with how the Talmud is often seen as a turn in which Jewish legal tradition shifts from the prophetic to the discursive. Before the Talmud, divine revelation was passed from prophets to the people.[26] With the Talmud, no more divine revelations are passed but rather rabbis continually interpret the Torah's implications for their communities. Authority on the law moved from divinely chosen messengers to the interpretations of learned men. This ongoing interpretation took place as a system of law within a specific community that remained stateless in the diaspora, always under the rule of law of another state to which it had to reconcile Jewish law.[27]

Rose focuses on the Talmud and *halacha* in *The Broken Middle* to designate a legal method. In *Mourning Becomes the Law* she uses 'Midrash' to mark her intervention in explorations of Midrash as method within literary studies in the 1980s.[28] In this context she focuses on Geoffrey Hartman's notion of Midrash

25. Barry Scott Wimpfheimer, *The Talmud: A Biography*, Princeton University Press, Princeton NJ, 2018.

26. See Michael Walzer et al., eds, *The Jewish Political Tradition*, Volume 1: *Authority*, ch. 6, 'Rabbis and Sages', Yale University Press, New Haven CT, 2000.

27. While it may be asked to what extent the Talmud contributes to a more exilic rather than statist model, Rose seems to reject this as part of 'Neo-Hebraic' efforts that aestheticize politics, such as 'idealizing of the interpretive or discursive community, of atoning criticism, of exilic Writing'. Rose, *Mourning Becomes the Law*, p. 80. For Talmud as an exilic, diasporic Jewish ethics, see Daniel Boyarin's *A Traveling Homeland: Talmud as Diaspora*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia PA, 2015. For how this has influenced broader leftist Jewish politics, see Jacob Plitman, 'On an Emerging Diasporism', *Jewish Currents*, 16 April 2018.

28. Popularized by Geoffrey Hartman and Harold Bloom, this method was also closely connected to Derrida. See Geoffrey Hartman and Sanford Budick, eds, *Midrash and Literature*, Yale University Press, New Haven CT, 1986; and John Llewelyn, *Derrida: On the Threshold of Sense*, Palgrave Macmillian, London, 1986.

as a method of 'unified multiplicity of interpretation' to find a method of interpretation after poststructuralist deconstruction that is still connected to a tradition.[29] This hermeneutics resonates with Hegel, emphasizing multiple contradictory interpretations that sustain a whole. Rose positions Hartman's Midrash as a 'unified multiplicity of interpretation', as a tool for repeated, broken political engagements within the state that refuse to give in to watered-down cultural pluralism.[30]

In *The Broken Middle* Rose brings together Talmudic and Hegelian mediation to explore this within a philosophical–legal realm. Her idea of 'the broken middle' proposes a space of mediating the quandaries of modernity without resolution: namely, living in the tension between ethics and law, particular and universal. It is a speculative method that draws on such divisions within communal life and emphasizes ethical nourishment from this.

In *The Broken Middle* this gains contours in the 'Violence and Halacha' sub-chapter, in which Rose critiques Levinas's 1982 interview as well as his *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise than Being*. While many understand Levinas's philosophical ethics as undergirded by Jewish interpretations and legal concepts, this is explicitly thematized in his Jewish, not his philosophical, writings.[31] Rose's main argument is that Levinas fails to apply the lessons of Talmudic argument to his philosophical writings. That is, she contends that his philosophical ethics follows the prophetic form of Jewish law rather than the later, rabbinic and broken Talmudic interpretation of divine command:

> Levinas' authorship here acknowledges and denies the diremption
> of ethics and *halacha*, ethics and law, just as in the interview cited

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29. Geoffrey Hartman, 'The Struggle for the Text', in *Midrash and Literature*, pp. 1–19.
30. Gillian Rose, *Mourning Becomes the Law: Philosophy and Representation*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1996, p. 78.
31. See Ethan Kleinberg, *Emmanuel Levinas' Talmudic Turn: Philosophy and Jewish Thought*, Stanford University Press, Stanford CA, 2021.

above it acknowledges and denies the diremption of love and
the state.... Commentator and exponent of the law in his *lectures
talmudiques*, [he] nevertheless, stakes his authorship on divine
'an-archy'.[32]

'Divine an-archy' here underscores the idea that Levinas's
ethics is rooted in divine command that leaves politics, law and
immanent life untouched. By not engaging in speculative legal
dialogue, immanent anarchy ensues from such ethics. This sets
the scene for moments of violence such as Sabra and Shatila.
Rose underscores that by keeping such a gap between ethics and
politics 'Levinas exonerates not only Israel in particular but the
whole political-historical structure of repetition backwards that
he evasively identifies.'[33]

Here, Rose's critique is not grounded in the particular
injustices done to the Palestinian Other or third. It is not about
measuring a failure of Jewish ethics, but rather about the general
broader condition of the dangers of seeing any state as based on
a separation between ethics and politics. Israel is a particular
example of the kind of violence such a vision entails. In this
context, Rose brings in Hegel to deepen her argument:

This *tertium quid*, in its equivocation without reduction makes it
possible to comprehend both Levinas and Hegel through making
the very difference in the place of the commandment precise, so
that the struggle – not the path – between universal and singularity,
between law and ethics, between that 'generous' and this flawed
jurisprudence, which Levinas will not thematize, but which Hegel
dramatizes, may emerge.[34]

Here Rose suggests that Talmud and Hegel both engage in a
'flawed jurisprudence'. Rose's intervention here is bold given
that Hegel is often stereotyped as an anti-Judaic thinker who
sees Judaism as a religion based on obedience to an abstract law

32. Rose, *The Broken Middle*, p. 249.
33. Ibid., p. 248.
34. Ibid., p. 266.

separated from the state form, commanded by an abstract God.[35] Rose turns this critique on its head by presenting him as more engaged in Talmud than Levinas. Conversely, by reading Talmud as a specific kind of speculative mediation, she Hegelianizes it in the process. In this context, the tension between 'generous' and 'flawed' jurisprudence designates the difference between the supposedly generous bourgeois law and the actually generative flawed (Talmudic) law. One law enacts violence in its promises of wholeness, while the other creates speculative space.

Rose's argument is based on 'the difference in the place of the commandment', which also marks a tension between Talmud and Hegel. To what commanding authority does each refer? Does this have implications for Rose's critique of Levinas?

Talmudic and Hegelian wrinkles: violence and the state

In exploring the tension between Talmudic and Hegelian authority, one short passage from *Hegel Contra Sociology* jumps out. There Rose expresses a small criticism of Hegel that she glosses as an 'inconsistency': 'For example, the role of monarch varies from merely "crossing the i's and dotting the t's", to that of being far more than a figurehead. This inconsistency, minor in itself, is an instance of a fundamental ambiguity in Hegel's ethical life.'[36] The ambiguity of the place of the sovereign within the speculative state seems to leave open the question of authority and power within the political state, driving a wedge in its transformation. It also brings up the question of to what extent the issues of authority for Hegel's state sovereign bear on those surrounding a Christian God's role in the broader journey of the Spirit.

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35. For more on how this effort ruffled the Neo-Kantian liberalism of Hermann Cohen dominant in modern Jewish thought at the time, see Martin Kavka, 'Saying Kaddish for Gillian Rose, or on Levinas and *Geltungsphilosophie*', in Clayton Crockett, ed., *Secular Theology*, Routledge, London, 2001.
36. Rose, *Hegel Contra Sociology*, p. 86.

This parallels Rose's dismissal of Beth Sharon Ash's critique of Geoffrey Hartman's Midrash as method as an essentially conservative venture.[37] Yet Ash convincingly pushes back against Midrash as a broadly applicable method, arguing: 'Such a description of the Hebraic hermeneutical style of interpretation would seem, however, to forget conveniently about God and his text ... Midrash is not merely intertextuality since its dialogue is restrained by the requirement to respect God's words.'[38] Accordingly, one could say: Hegel and Talmud are not merely speculative legal forms because they are restrained by their requirement to respect particular (divine) authorities.

The issue here is not that of contradiction, for Rose's and Hegel's speculative models are premised on clashing entities in ongoing dialogue. On the one hand, Rose's recourse to two specific, different models nevertheless still privileges certain frames of authority, idealizing both Hegel and Judaism in a manner potentially violent to those outside of them. In the specific example of the Sabra and Shatila massacre, what does it mean that Rose seeks to correct the original mistakes of a Jewish-inflected model of the state (Levinas as separating ethics and politics) intimately connected with extreme violence with yet another Jewish-inflected model (a speculative state of the Hegelian Talmudic broken middle)? On the other hand, Rose contends that violence is part of the law and indeed belongs to the painful process of negotiating the broken middle. But if her Talmudic Hegel rests on an unstable sovereignty, this leaves little space for the kind of political decisions that prevent violence. As Vincent Lloyd notes in his discussion of Rose's broken middle, 'claims to sovereignty do violence but relationality offers no relief'.[39]

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37. Rose, *Mourning Becomes the Law*, p. 82.
38. Beth Sharon Ash, 'Review: Jewish Hermeneutics and Contemporary Theories of Textuality: Hartman, Bloom, and Derrida', *Modern Philology,* vol. 85, no. 1, pp 65–80; p. 70.
39. Lloyd, 'Law All the Way Down', p. 332.

Any attempt to find universal ethics pushes up against its sourcing in a particular model. Rose's Hegelian Talmudic broken middle does not propose a finished or complete ethics, but nevertheless its Hegelian and Talmudic dialogue partners are still particular entities with particular histories that risk violence in their broader application. For example, it is difficult to imagine applying such an understanding of Rose's broken middle to current Palestine and Israel. Amidst an unfolding genocide in Gaza, a call for a Jewish-infused Hegelian Talmudic-style model, no matter how speculative, would still be felt as violent. Conversely, Rose's analysis of Levinas does not offer a means for how to intervene in particular instances of political violence. Recourse to broken mediation falls short here as speculative reconciliation hits its limit. However much a universalized ethics without violent traces is an impossible ask, engaging with Rose means centring these tensions between a flawed jurisprudence and sovereign violence.

9

The risk of action

ROBERT LUCAS SCOTT

Thinking and acting, for Gillian Rose, are a matter of risk. The outcomes of critical rationality, political action, even a love affair, cannot be secured or guaranteed in advance. Instead, they can only be discovered 'by taking the risk of action, and then by reflecting on its unintended consequences, and then taking the risk, yet again, of further action, and so on'.[1] Both theory and practice involve the 'risk of positing and failing and positing again'.[2] Politics in particular, she writes, 'does not happen when you act on behalf of your own damaged good, but when you act, *without guarantees*, for the good of all – this is to take *the risk* of the *universal* interest'.[3]

Unlike for Kant, for whom the critique of pure reason is an exercise in risk minimization, of getting one's tools in order, anticipating the pitfalls, ensuring the correct outcomes before getting going, and arguably forestalling the beginning altogether, Rose follows Hegel, who begins instead with the question: 'Should we not be concerned as to whether this fear of error is

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not just the error itself?[4] His phenomenology proceeds by taking the risk that things might go terribly wrong, that there may be unexpected eventualities, but that when these occur they can be learned from when we resolve to begin all over again – to return, as Rose puts it in *Love's Work*, to 'the fray', to 'the revel of ideas and risk'.[5] It is for this reason that Rose writes in *Hegel Contra Sociology* that Hegel's '*Phenomenology* is not a success, it is a gamble'.[6] Reading it is not about the achievement of some predetermined result, but the risky, difficult work of committing to a position, risking both loss and gain, and learning through the process. It means following a path into and out of seemingly endless dead ends – not because knowledge is an infinite maze in which we are irrevocably lost and disoriented, but because its movement demands repeated engagement, exposure and return.[7]

In this sense, we might say, in Kierkegaardian terms, that the *Phenomenology* is a work of *faith*. This is a term Rose later defines as both a 'negative capability' – 'as Keats puts it, the capacity of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after facts and reasons' – and a 'positive capability' – an idea 'not developed by Keats', but understood as 'the enlarging of inhibited reason in the domain of praxis, of practical reason, Aristotle's *phronesis*'.[8] Faith in this double sense is, once again, the willingness to dwell in uncertainty, to take the risk of action, and to learn from the outcome. Indeed, in *The Broken Middle*, Rose brings Hegel and Kierkegaard together arguing

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4. G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1977, p. 47, §74. For a more developed argument on Rose, Hegel and beginnings, see Robert Lucas Scott, 'The anxiety of beginning', *Thesis Eleven*, vol. 186, no. 1, 2025, pp. 137–52.

5. Gillian Rose, *Love's Work*, New York Review of Books, New York, 2011, p. 144.

6. Gillian Rose, *Hegel Contra Sociology*, Verso, London, 2009, p. 168.

7. For Rose's elaboration of a dialectical notion of method as 'following the path', see Gillian Rose, 'Does Marx Have a Method?', in Robert Lucas Scott, ed., *Thesis Eleven*, vol. 186, no. 1, 2025, pp. 3–12. For a more detailed elaboration of the experiential content of reading Hegel and its import for a theory of critical reading more generally, see Robert Lucas Scott, *Reading Hegel: Irony, Recollection, Critique*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago IL, 2015.

8. Gillian Rose, *Paradiso*, Menard Press, London, 1999, pp. 31–2.

that, in spite of their commonly perceived incompatibility, both pursue an education in risk through the risk of failure: through unflinchingly and repeatedly coming up against the violent confrontation between intentions and outcomes. They both 'suspend the ethical', to use Kierkegaard's term, and in doing so, as Rose puts it,

> both authors are able to bring a formation, an education (*Bildung*), into representation as a *struggle – agon –* in which 'violence' is inseparable from staking oneself, from experience as such – the initial yet yielding recalcitrance of action and passion. Without 'violence', which is not sacrifice but risk, language, labour, love – life – would not live.

This insistence on taking risks without guarantees, for the good of all, including the risk of violence, might recall similar claims made by Slavoj Žižek, whose books frequently include a call for what he variously terms an 'abyssal' or 'real-impossible' act; a '*pure voluntarism*' or 'free decision to act against historical necessity'[9] – a revolutionary political act without the guarantee of success or the authorization of any big Other, taken without calculation, reflection or strategic deliberation, but which might sufficiently disrupt the status quo to provide the opening for something new. Marcus Pound, for instance, has equated the political space created and sustained by such an act – 'in which, without any external guarantee, ethical decisions are made and negotiated' – to Rose's figure of the broken middle.[10] Žižek also

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9. '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*'. Slavoj Žižek, *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism*, Verso, London, 2010, pp. 963. 'The circle is thus (almost) closed: humanitarian charity participates in the universe which creates victims; eco-sustainability reproduces the very ecological problems it claims to resolve; reforms of capitalism make it more efficient... The circle is ALMOST closed: it is impossible to break out of it, which means one can do it by means of a real-impossible act.' Slavoj Žižek, *Sex and the Failed Absolute*, Bloomsbury, London, 2020, p. 458. '[W]hat alone can prevent such calamity is, then, *pure voluntarism*, in other words, our free decision to act against historical necessity.' Slavoj Žižek, *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce*, Verso, London, 2009, p. 154; emphasis in original.

10. Marcus Pound, 'Rose *contra* Girard: Kenotic Comedy and Social Theory (Or, Žižek

frames this act, like Rose, in both Hegelian and Kierkegaardian terms. He reads Hegel's Christology as affirming the death of the God of the beyond (the death of the big Other, the death of guarantees) which thereby opens up a radical abyss of terrifying, groundless freedom – a freedom to *act*;[11] and he understands this act as akin to Kierkegaard's notion of 'the leap of faith', one which requires a full subjective engagement for its cause, the truth of which 'is perceptible only to those who accomplish this leap, not to neutral observers'.[12] And just as Rose's conception of the risky act requires the Kierkegaardian repetition of 'positing and failing and positing again', Žižek's abyssal act 'is not a gradual progress, but a repetitive movement, a movement of *repeating the beginning* again and again' – of 'failing again and failing better', as he likes to put it, with reference to Samuel Beckett's *Worstward Ho*.[13]

Despite these Hegelian and Kierkegaardian signifiers, though, Žižek's theory of the abyssal act – and perhaps, as Peter Osborne has argued, his broader philosophical project – owes its greatest debt to Alain Badiou, for whom the naming of the event – the affirmation, after the fact, that something transformative has taken place; and the declaration of fidelity to it as a cause – is strictly 'illegal, supernumerary, drawn from the void': 'illegal in that it cannot conform to any *law* of representation'.[14] In

as a Reader of Rose)', in Joshua B. Davis, ed., *Misrecognitions: Gillian Rose and the Task of Political Theology*, Cascade Books, Eugene OR, pp. 67–86, here p. 85, with quotation from Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, p. 963.

11. See for instance: 'What dies on the cross is not an earthly representative or messenger of god, but as Hegel put it, the god of the beyond itself, so that the dead Christ returns as Holy Ghost which is nothing more than the egalitarian community of believers .... This community is free in the radical sense of being abandoned to itself, with no transcendent higher power guaranteeing its fate. It is in this sense that god gives us freedom – by way of erasing itself out of the picture.' Slavoj Žižek, *Christian Atheism: How to Be a Real Materialist*, Bloomsbury Academic, London, 2024, p. 3.

12. Slavoj Žižek, 'Afterword: Lenin's Choice', *Revolution at the Gates: A Selection of Writings from February to October 1917*, by V.I. Lenin, ed. Slavoj Žižek, Verso, London, 2002, pp. 165–336, p. 187.

13. Slavoj Žižek, 'How to Begin from the Beginning', *The Idea of Communism*, ed. Costas Douzinas and Slavoj Žižek, Verso, London, 2010, pp. 209–26; p. 210; emphasis in original.

14. Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, trans. Oliver Feltham, Continuum, London, 2007,

other words, transformation, whether in thought or in action, emerges from the abyss (in Žižek's terminology) or the void (in Badiou's). It marks a pure beginning from outside the law, something strictly 'unnameable' in the language of the present situation, and totally unrecognizable except to those who have been transformed into a subject by it. For Žižek in particular a political act is not the product of deliberation and reflection, or an informed, critical engagement with actuality, but instead the product of an uncompromising engagement with one's own subjective commitments, and following them to their end: '[T]he decision is purely formal', he writes, 'ultimately a decision to decide, without a clear awareness of what the subject is decid-ing about; it is a non-psychological act, unemotional, with no motives, desires or fears; it is incalculable, not the outcome of strategic argumentation; it is a totally free act.... Only afterwards is this pure act "subjectivized", translated into a (rather unpleas-ant) psychological experience.'[15]

If your Rosean alarm bells weren't ringing already, perhaps they are now. Throughout her work, Rose consistently challenges claims of radical novelty or ruptures with the past by seeking to expose the illusions and presuppositions of such ostensibly pure beginnings, which take themselves to be *im-mediate* – or, etymologically, 'not-in-the-middle'. She is particularly critical of philosophies that claim to effect or else demand a break with the question of law – whether law is conceived as necessity (as opposed to freedom), as legality and institutionality (as opposed to morality), or even as commandment (as opposed to grace). This critique is not grounded in a defence of the law as something to be simply obeyed, but instead in an argument that an act which seeks to transgress or transform hegemonic systems

pp. 206, 205; emphasis in original. See Peter Osborne, 'More than Everything: Žižek's Badiouian Hegel', *Radical Philosophy* 177, Jan/Feb 2013, pp. 19–25.
15. Slavoj Žižek, Foreword to the second edition, *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor*, Verso, London, 2008, p. xli.

of law must at some point come to confront how it is already implicated in and configured by them; that this implication and configuration cannot be simply overcome through an act of recognition or an act of will; and that any attempt to do so can only have the effect of obscuring social reality and keeping it the same.

While Rose's affirmation of risk was largely motivated by what she perceived as a contemporary philosophical and political tendency to avoid risk at all costs – an abandonment of Old Athens for the hope of a risk-free New Jerusalem – the other side of this dialectical coin (represented by Žižek, for instance) would be a philosophy for which risk should be taken *blindly*. With the former, violence and risk are disavowed; with the latter, they are fetishized. One offers us sainthood; the other 'the pathos of self-inflating and posed heroism' – a tragic gesture which, as Robert Pippin scathingly puts it, 'belongs in the Hegelian zoo along with The Beautiful Soul, The Knight of Virtue and especially the Frenzy of Self-Conceit'.[16] In either case, for Rose, whether sainthood or heroism, the relation to and complicity with the violence of the law of the situation is not escaped but simply buried.

In the rest of this essay I will argue that Rose's philosophy provides a historically thoroughgoing conception of the political will and act as historically impure. I will also argue, however, that it is only through the risk of such an action, through the suspension of the ethical, that this impurity becomes visible. Only through the repetition of *this* act, which Rose terms a 'struggle', might we repeat forwards, might risk be educated, and might the law itself transformed. This argument will be in two halves: with regard to Hegel and Kierkegaard, respectively. First, I will elaborate, through Rose's reading of Hegel's critique of Kant and Fichte, why it is for Rose that an appeal to the purity of

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16. Robert B. Pippin, 'Slavoj Žižek's Hegel', *Interanimations: Receiving Modern German Philosophy*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago IL, 2015, pp. 91–116; p. 106.

the will or of the act as a means of disrupting historical necessity is an illusion – an illusion which re-presents social reality while simultaneously obscuring it. And then, with reference to her reading of the retelling of the biblical story of Abraham and Isaac by Johannes *de silentio* (one of Kierkegaard's pseudonymous authorships), I will develop Rose's theory of the act which is repetitively risked in spite of its impurity.

Hegel

Hegel's early essay on natural law begins with a critique of empirical theories of natural law, criticizing them in particular for their appeal to state-of-nature myths as if they were empirical observations. These theories often begin with the accurate, if rather banal, observation that social relations, customs and historical institutions are contingent and transitory. They then assume, however, that once these historical contingencies are stripped away, what remains is the basic truth of human nature. Hegel points, for example, to Hobbes's depiction of the state of nature, stripped of governance, where individuals 'without other security, than what their own strength, and their own invention shall furnish them withall', as 'solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short' – what Rose describes as 'the chaos of individuals'.[17] But he could equally have referred, for instance, to Rousseau's theory of humanity's natural state as one of peaceful, isolated, self-sufficient individuals.

   In some ways this could be compared to an argument made in a more recent book by David Graeber and David Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything*, which criticizes pop-political philosophers such as Francis Fukuyama, Steven Pinker and Yuval Noah Harari for uncritically repurposing these state-of-nature myths,

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17. Rose, *Hegel Contra Sociology*, p. 56; Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Richard Tuck, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2003, p. 89.

drawn from Hobbes or Rousseau, to explain or even justify the emergence of inequality and political hierarchy.[18] Hegel, however, arguably goes a step further than Graeber and Wengrow, for he not only reveals that such state-of-nature myths are fictional and misleading about early human history; he also demonstrates how they are themselves shaped by present conditions – how they smuggle in the assumptions of the very social order they claim to explain and, in doing so, naturalize and obscure the present. As Rose writes, Hegel shows how empirical natural law theory is

> 'empirical' in a sense which it does not acknowledge.... Instead of deriving the political unity of society from an imagined state of nature as it claims, empirical natural law 'derives' the real, observed, superficial lack of unity in bourgeois society from an observation of particular fragments of social life which are analysed as if they constituted the fundamental elements of the whole.[19]

In other words, empirical natural law theories observe the occasional 'chaos of individuals', or conversely the occasional formal freedom and self-sufficiency of individuals, within the present formation of society, and elevate these historically contingent phenomena to the status of *a priori* truths.

After criticizing empirical theories of natural law, Hegel turns to their apparent opposite: the idealist theories of Kant and Fichte. While, as Rose writes, 'Kant and Fichte were opposed to empirical natural law ... in Hegel's eyes, they represent its culmination.'[20] This is because, by rejecting the empirical content of natural law entirely and by strictly separating the moral realm of freedom and the autonomous rational will from the empirical realm of historical necessity, Kant and Fichte not only preserve the foundational structure of these earlier theorists, they reinforce them. By elevating a particular principle to the status of

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18. David Graeber and David Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity*, Penguin Books, London, 2022, pp. 1–27.
19. Rose, *Hegel Contra Sociology*, p. 56.
20. Ibid., p. 57.

an *a priori*, they formalize the very abstraction they seek to trans-cend and, in doing so, they obscure the extent to which this *a priori* is itself socially and historically mediated. For Hegel, both empirical and idealist theories of natural law are grounded in the same presupposition: they 'posit the being of the individual as the primary and supreme being'. This conception, he argues, reflects not a universal truth but a historically specific feature of property relations. Yet it is only 'in the idealism of Kant and Fichte', in Hegel's words, that this is raised to the level of 'pure abstraction'.[21] Bourgeois property relations, as Rose puts it, 'make people into competing, isolated, "moral" individuals who can only relate externally to one another, and are thus subjected to a real lack of identity', and then Kant's and Fichte's philosophies presuppose and stabilize this fractured social condition: they assume 'individuals in this relation to each other, relative ethical life, and fixes them in it. Like empirical natural law, Kant and Fichte abstract from all specific historical aspects of social life, and thus reaffirm an abstracted, "moral" individual who only represents one part of it.'[22] This conception of the individual, therefore, both obscures and re-presents existing social relations. It 'soars above the wreckage of the world' (as Hegel puts it in his essay on *Faith and Knowledge*), while remaining shaped by it in a way that it disavows.[23]

At first glance, this may seem at odds with the Introduction to the *Philosophy of Right*, in which Hegel *begins* with the free will and the self-determination of the 'I', which is then developed and realized within a collective social and political context. Indeed,

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21. G.W.F. Hegel, *Natural Law: The Scientific Ways of Treating Natural Law, Its Place in Moral Philosophy, and Its Relation to the Positive Sciences of Law*, trans. T.M. Knox, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia PA, 1975, p. 70.

22. Rose, *Hegel Contra Sociology*, p. 60.

23. Quoted in ibid., p. 107. For a more detailed account of Rose's appropriation of Hegel's critique of Kant and Fichte for smuggling historical categories of law into their apparently ahistorical philosophies, see Robert Lucas Scott, 'Phenomenology of Necessary Illusion: Gillian Rose on Personification and the Failure to Think the Absolute', *Radical Philosophy* 2.19, Summer 2025, pp. 25–41.

Peter Hallward argues that, 'After Fichte, Hegel complements the voluntarist trajectory initiated by Rousseau and Kant ... when he identifies a free collective will – a will that wills and realizes its own emancipation – as the animating principle of a concrete political association.'[24] Hallward supports this reading with a passage from near the beginning of the *Philosophy of Right*, in which Hegel writes that the will is nothing other than 'thinking translating itself into existence.... The activity of the will consists in cancelling and over-coming [*aufzuheben*] the contradiction between subjectivity and objectivity and in translating its ends from the subjective determination into an objective one.'[25]

However, this mistakes the opening of Hegel's exposition for its result, reading as an endorsement of a voluntarist view of the will what, for Rose, is only an abstract and provisional starting point. As she puts it, it is 'an abstract statement of the prevalent philosophical concept of the will couched in Fichtean terms.... Hegel is restating this abstraction, not endorsing it; it is the beginning not the result of the exposition of ethical life.'[26] This claim forms part of Rose's broader argument that the *Philosophy of Right* has a phenomenological form; that, like the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, it traces the illusions and experiences of natural consciousness as it confronts and overcomes its own limitations and presuppositions, and the obstacles to doing so. 'Unfortunately', she notes, 'the mistakes of natural consciousness which Hegel was exposing have frequently been attributed to him.'[27] The fact that Hegel begins with the abstract will does not, for Rose, mean that it serves as the foundation of his concepts of freedom and right. On the contrary, it functions much like

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24. Peter Hallward, 'The Will of the People: Notes towards a Dialectical Voluntarism', *Radical Philosophy* 155, May/June 2009, pp. 17–29; p. 25.

25. G.W.F. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, trans. H.B. Nisbet, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1991, §4A, §28; quoted with modified translation in Hallward, 'The Will of the People', pp. 25–6.

26. Rose, *Hegel Contra Sociology*, p. 85.

27. Ibid., p. 54.

'sense-certainty' in the *Phenomenology*, as the most immediate and illusory form of the concept in question. It is not a truth to be affirmed, but a position to be worked through.

This is to say that a theory of the risk of action, for Rose, cannot be predicated on a primordial or foundational notion of freedom understood as freedom from necessity. Such a notion of freedom as primary is not, as Žižek might suggest, the capacity to disrupt or rupture the historical present, but rather an abstraction *from* it – a re-presentation of the present that disavows its own conditions. Such a freedom appears autonomous, unaffected by the dynamics of capitalism, when in fact it is precisely those dynamics that have made this abstract notion of freedom possible. Far from being a transcendental capacity, the imagined purity of this freedom is the ideological form of freedom specific to capitalist modernity.

Admittedly, things are not looking good. If concepts like freedom, will and agency are shown to be always-already implicated in in the legal structures of bourgeois society – particularly in the framework of property law – then it might seem as though thought and action not only *risk* failure but are destined for it. This implication extends to philosophy itself, which, as Rose notes, arises 'in a society where real recognition has not been achieved' while at the same time positing the 'concept of real recognition'. In doing so, it 'reinforces the primacy of the concept, and falls into the terms of the dichotomy which it seeks to transform'. This is central to Rose's claim that all philosophy, even Hegel's, 'contains an abstract imperative, a moment of *Sollen* [ought]', even in spite of Hegel's insistence that philosophy should not prescribe or legislate that anything ought to be the case.[28] By tracing the necessary failures to think the absolute, to achieve real recognition, or to institute freedom – failures which

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28. Ibid., p. 84.

are necessary not in the Kantian sense (as structural limits of reason), but in the historical sense (as limits embedded in social formations) – Hegel's philosophy inevitably points beyond itself. It implies, however obliquely, the possibility of an alternative world in which these concepts are not merely, abstractly posited but realized.

Rose argues that this is 'to think the absolute and to fail to think it quite different from Kant and Fichte's thinking and failing to think it' – less a closure than a reflexive exposure of philosophy's own historical conditions and limits.[29] Yet, as Peter Osborne argued in his early review of *Hegel Contra Sociology*, this might feel like 'something of a Pyrrhic victory, both sociologically and practically. For while the acknowledgment and explanation of an unjustifiable element of *Sollen* in speculative experience reasserts its theoretical consistency, it also serves to emphasize both its theoretical and practical impotence.'[30] In this reading, philosophy can show us why freedom is unrealized, but not how to make it real.

As Rose herself acknowledges, while Hegel can think the identity of revolutionary consciousness and its social determinations – a consciousness that, as she writes, 'will re-form the ethical without being re-formed by it' – he can only do so abstractly.[31] Absolute ethical life (what Marx would later call communism) remains thinkable but historically unrealized, precisely because 'it has never existed in history'.[32] Philosophy, in this sense, necessarily fails – but it fails in a way that reveals the dominance of abstraction under capital and therefore urges us to transform that which has determined it. This, for Rose, is philosophy's critical force. Its modern task is not to prescribe a new order,

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29. Ibid., p. 218.
30. Peter Osborne, 'Hegelian Phenomenology and the Critique of Reason and Society', *Radical Philosophy* 32, Autumn 1982, pp. 8–15; pp. 13–14.
31. Rose, *Hegel Contra Sociology*, p. 195.
32. Ibid., p. 214.

but to present the contradictory relations between substance and subject, or capital and culture, in order to link an analysis of the economy to the subjective conditions and obstacles for revolutionary practice. Yet for Osborne this is unsatisfactory, for 'philosophy cannot specify *concretely* what this new mode of transformation is'. And while 'the reiteration of such a position may clear our philosophical consciences … it remains impotent in the face of contemporary reality'.[33]

Kierkegaard

Geoffrey Hill writes in his poem in memory of Rose that this is 'a bleak ontology / to have to contemplate; it may be all we have'.[34] Can we move beyond this bleakness; this concession that there is no way out? Perhaps this is why, in *Paradiso*, the unfinished sequel to *Love's Work*, Rose writes that one of the things you need to be a philosopher is 'acceptance of pathlessness (*aporia*): that there may be no solutions to questions, only the clarification of their statement'.[35] Perhaps philosophy offers no exit, but only a deeper understanding of why we remain stuck where we are.

And yet my argument to end this article is that Rose's turn to Kierkegaard in *The Broken Middle* does not mark a retreat from radical commitments. It is not, as Anthony Gorman has argued from opposing perspectives, either a turn towards 'inwardness and an ethic of singularity' or a dangerous politics for which 'Everything is ruled in; nothing is ruled out.'[36] Nor does it signal, as Martin Jay suggests, an abandonment of 'the promise of a

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33. Osborne, 'Hegelian Phenomenology', pp. 14–15. For a more developed engagement with Osborne's criticisms of Rose, see Scott, 'Phenomenology of Necessary Illusion', pp. 26–7, 35–6.
34. Geoffrey Hill, 'In Memoriam: Gillian Rose', in *Love's Work*, by Gillian Rose, pp. 147–50; p. 150.
35. Rose, *Paradiso*, p. 42.
36. See Tony Gorman, 'Gillian Rose and the Project of a Critical Marxism', *Radical Philosophy* 105, January/February 2001, pp. 25–36; p. 25; and Anthony Gorman, 'Gillian Rose's Critique of Violence', *Radical Philosophy* 197, May/June 2016, pp. 25–35; p. 35.

different future contained in aesthetic form' in favour of the belief that 'eternity exits in the here and now for those with faith'.[37] Nor, finally, does it amount to quiet abandonment of Marxist categories in favour of a 'much more general project', as Osborne contends in his retrospective account of Rose and Marxism – a shift towards '(re)thinking the political potential of the European philosophical tradition'.[38]

Instead, I argue that Rose's turn to Kierkegaard builds directly on the argument first developed in *Hegel Contra Sociology* that Hegel's philosophy harbours an implicit unphilosophical *Sollen* – a moment of subjective commitment without guarantees, emerging from philosophy's own demonstration of the domination of abstraction which cannot be overcome through thought alone. In *Hegel Contra Sociology*, this *Sollen* remains largely formal and abstract: a general imperative to transform ethical life. In *The Broken Middle*, however, this imperative is reconfigured into a kind of phenomenology of revolutionary commitment and education – one in which the absolute is not finally thought but repeatedly staked, represented and risked. As Bogdan Ovcharuk, the only other commentator to argue this point directly, puts it: Rose's engagement with Kierkegaard's philosophical authorship is an attempt 'to address the problem of Marxist revolutionary subjectivity – specifically its tendency towards abstract intentions'.[39] If the central motif of *Hegel Contra Sociology* was the repeated claim that 'Hegel's philosophy has no social import if the absolute cannot be thought', the central claim of *The Broken Middle* could be that Kierkegaard's philosophy has no social import if the absolute cannot be concretely risked, in a way that exposes the mediated relationship between subjectivity and

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37. Martin Jay, Afterword to Gillian Rose, *Marxist Modernism: Introductory Lectures on Frankfurt School Critical Theory*, ed. Robert Lucas Scott and James Gordon Finalyson, Verso, London, 2024, pp. 129–43; p. 143.

38. Peter Osborne, 'Gillian Rose and Marxism', *Telos* 173, 2015, pp. 55–67; p. 55.

39. Bogdan Ovcharuk, 'Faith and Revolution in Gillian Rose's Critical Marxism', *Political Theology*, February 2025, pp. 1–21; p. 18.

social reality.[40] Rose's wager is that philosophy's impasses – its necessary failures – end not in resignation but in the reactivation of political commitment at the point where conceptual resolution breaks down. This is not a withdrawal from Marxist critique, but its transformation into a mode of lived dialectical risk.

This is most clearly demonstrated in Rose's reading of *Fear and Trembling*, in which Kierkegaard's pseudonymous authorship of Johannes *de silentio* retells the biblical story of Abraham's readiness to sacrifice his only son in obedience to God. There is, of course, Abraham's own risk: the terrifying wager that God will return Isaac, even as he prepares to lose him. But *de silentio* also takes a risk of his own – one that often goes unnoticed – by speculatively rewriting Abraham's act from within and in tension with an ethical or juridical community – a *middle* – that is not Abraham's own. As Rose notes, '*de silentio* distinguishes Abraham from the tragic hero who is saved by the middle term, the ethical' – that is, from figures like Agamemnon (the Greek king), Jephthah (the Israelite judge) and Brutus (the Roman consul), all of whom also sacrifice their children. In these cases, however, their 'communities are able to understand the killing of their offspring and hence to grieve with them and for them' – there exists a middle term that renders their sacrifice legible, however tragic.[41] Abraham, by contrast, stands outside any such mediation. His act is performed in a world without a middle – in 'a holy nomadic community which has not yet even received the written covenant or Torah'.[42] For the Abraham of Genesis, there is *no* so-called 'teleological suspension of the ethical' because there is, quite literally, no ethical life to suspend. This is why Abraham inspires what Rose calls 'holy terror' – not simply

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40. See Rose, *Hegel Contra Sociology*, pp. 45, 98, 218, 223. As Ovcharuk puts it: 'the social import of Kierkegaard's thought is the realization that one cannot do away with the subjective representation of the absolute'. Ovcharuk, 'Faith and Revolution', p. 14.

41. Rose, *The Broken Middle*, p. 17.

42. Ibid., pp. 17–18.

because of what he does, but because his act cannot be justified, shared or received.[43] In this sense, uniquely, it is what Žižek describes as an abyssal act.

Rose argues, however, that the figure of Abraham is 'plundered' by *de silentio*,[44] not to model acting blindly (which arguably *is* the predicament of Abraham in the biblical story), but instead to develop the figure of the knight of faith: one who takes the risk of action within a broken middle, under conditions where ethical terms are fractured, uncertain, but nonetheless actual. This marks the difference of the knight of faith from the tragic hero *and* from the Abraham of Genesis. The violence committed by Agamemnon, Jephthah and Brutus is tragic but socially and politically legible and legal; Abraham's threat of violence, by contrast, is holy but illegible and illegal – or even purely non-legal, as it precedes the law. The knight of faith, meanwhile, acts in an uncertain relation to both legibility and legality: the outcome, reception and ethical significance of the act are not guaranteed. And yet the knight takes this risk – and then, after reflection on the now-known outcomes, takes it again, and so on – precisely in order to bring these into view: to bring the repeated acts, which we might term *a struggle*, into terms of legibility and legality, so that they might be shared, so that mourning might become the law.

For this reason, its violence is risky, but not abyssal: it suspends the ethical, but it does not abolish it. As Rose insists: '*To posit that the ethical is "suspended" is to acknowledge that it is always already presupposed.*' While the notion of an abolition of the ethical through an abyssal act, through a kind of Benjaminian law-destroying divine violence, may have a certain romance, it necessarily involves the illogical positing of 'a time

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43. Ibid., p. 17.
44. Ibid., p. 18.

outside time, or a social reality outside reality'.[45] The suspension of the ethical, meanwhile, for Rose, incessantly returns us to time and to reality. As she writes in an essay in *Judaism and Modernity*: 'The suspension of the ethical may be transhistorical but it is not suprahistorical' for it returns us 'in an instant' to our 'stake in the struggle of particular and universal'.[46] It is an act which does not oppose itself to the world absolutely – which would be an act of disavowal – but one which discovers time and again how it is a part of it, a discovery which is a condition of transforming it.

If we only read *Hegel Contra Sociology*, then the conclusion of Osborne's early review may be correct: that Rose's focus on philosophy's implicit *Sollen* lends theoretical consistency but signals practical impotence. Yet this is precisely why it must now be read in the context of her later work, in which this non-philosophical moment is transformed from a mere abstract imperative into a concrete risk; a shift from *aporia* or impasse to *agon* or struggle.

Change does not come from the abyss or the void, or from an act of willpower alone; and appeals to these in their characterless purity serve only to obscure reality and keep it the same. As Rose writes in *Dialectic of Nihilism*: 'political voluntarism erupts to affirm the ... "beyond", which Foucault calls the "until now" and which will most surely repeat just that'.[47] The fantasy of a forced rupture from outside or against history – a Žižekian abyssal act – becomes not a vehicle of transformation but a cycle of repetition. To imagine freedom as a freedom from historical constraints is therefore not only misleading, but disempowering. It veils the conditions and contradictions through which genuine action and

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45. Ibid., p. 148.
46. Gillian Rose, *Judaism and Modernity: Philosophical Essays*, Verso, London, 2017, p. 172.
47. Gillian Rose, *Dialectic of Nihilism: Post-Structuralism and Law*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1984, p. 207.

transformation might occur. As Rose puts it, 'The very struggle to keep one's autonomy separate from one's heteronomy robs "morality" of the knowledge and of the politics which might reorient this predicament.' It denies the subject the very terrain upon which freedom might be realized.

This dialectic is borne out in many of the most prevalent Western political movements of recent decades, from Occupy to BLM, the *gilets jaunes* and XR. These movements were more or less disorganized on principle – resisting leadership, clear programmes and institutions, often favouring spectacular but largely symbolic demonstrations, aimed at influencing political power rather than claiming it – but also, and relatedly, grounded in a notion of political subjectivity that imagines itself apart from the impasses of capitalist reality and time, symbolized by their carnivalesque occupation of large open spaces. Coupled together, these tendencies may begin to account for why, despite moments of impact, such movements were ultimately short-lived and failed to develop into a sustained struggle and substantial political programme. This is to commend not collusion with the tyranny of the city but an uncompromising struggle within its walls: a politics which reckons with, rather than disavows, the necessary negotiations of power and violence – both of one's enemies and of one's own.

This is just one reason why Rose's thought demands more careful engagement than ever. Her conception of risk entails a politics which refuses all intellectual and political comfort and complacency, all heroes, saints, beautiful souls, holy mended middles, New Jerusalems and promised lands; a refusal of all locations outside the city – not because the city is just or good enough, but precisely because, when we imagine ourselves apart from the city, we disavow the ways in which we are shaped by and implicated in its injustice, and miss the latent possibilities for justice which might be discovered within it. To take the risk

of returning to the city, then, is to be constantly returned to the actuality of a committed struggle against, through and with the violence and love of what William Wordsworth describes as

> the very world, which is the world
> Of all of us, – the place where, in the end,
> We find our happiness, or not at all![48]

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48. William Wordsworth, *The Prelude: The Four Texts (1798, 1799, 1805, 1850)*, ed. Jonathan Wordsworth, Penguin, London, 1995, p. 443.

Image credits

Contributors

ANDREW BROWER LATZ is head of Religion and Philosophy at the Manchester Grammar School. His publications include *The Social Philosophy of Gillian Rose* (2018); entries on Gillian Rose in *The Literary Encyclopedia* (2024) and *The Sage Handbook to Frankfurt School Critical Theory* (2018); 'Towards a Rosean Political Theology of Recognition', in *Misrecognitions: Gillian Rose and the Task of Political Theology* (2018).

HOWARD CAYGILL was Professor of Modern European Philosophy at CRMEP, 2011–25. He is currently Professor of Philosophy, Aesthetics and Visual Culture at the Institute for Doctoral Studies in the Visual Arts, Portland, Maine. His new book *Aesthetics of Madness* will be published in 2026 by Bloomsbury.

ED COOPER is a writer and composer. He is the author of *Aural Liminalities in New Music*, and the co-editor of *Tempo: The Quarterly Review of New Music*. His compositional work is widely performed throughout Europe, with recent performances by Terra Invisus, Lotte Betts-Dean, Kathryn Williams and Jack Adler-McKean. His album *Hekate's Voices* was released through Sawyer Spaces in 2025.

NICHOLAS GANE is Professor of Sociology at the University of Warwick. His recent publications include articles on competition, debt, usury, techno-feudalism and the history of neoliberalism.

LOUIS HARTNOLL is a Leverhulme Trust postdoctoral researcher in the Kunstgeschiedenis department at the Universiteit van Amsterdam. He is on the editorial board of *Historical Materialism*. With Andreas Selg, he is completing a monograph on Peter Weiss's *The Aesthetics of Resistance*.

PETER OSBORNE is Professor of Modern European Philosophy at Kingston University and the founding director of the now-independent Centre for Research in Modern European Philosophy (CRMEP), an educational association that organizes research groups, events and publications.

RACHEL PAFE is a writer and researcher based in Berlin. Her academic research deals with Gillian Rose's fraught relationship with religion, Marxism and political action. Her writing has been featured in *The Baffler*, *Radical Philosophy*, *Berlin Review*, *Vashti*, *Marginalia Review of Books*, *Protocols* and *The Conversationalist*. She is part of the Night Sheyds* collective and a host for the Biography channel of New Books Network. She also runs the Reading in Constellation reading group and publication project at Hopscotch Reading Room.

KATE SCHICK is Associate Professor of International Relations at Te Herenga Waka-Victoria University of Wellington. Her research lies at the intersection of critical theory and international political theory, with an emphasis on relational, embodied and place-based theory and practice. She is author of *Gillian Rose: A Good Enough Justice* (2012) and co-editor of *The Vulnerable Subject: Beyond Rationalism in International Relations* (2013), *Recognition in Global Politics: Critical Encounters between State and World* (2016) and *Subversive Pedagogies: Radical Possibility in the Academy* (2022).

ROBERT LUCAS SCOTT is an arts research fellow at Jesus College Cambridge. He is the author of *Reading Hegel: Irony, Recollection, Critique* (2025) and an editor of *Marxist Modernism: Introductory Lectures on Frankfurt School Critical Theory* by Gillian Rose (2024). His academic writing has appeared in *Radical Philosophy*, *Critical Quarterly*, *Thesis Eleven*, *Critical Horizons*, *Angelaki* and *Textual Practice*. He is currently writing a book on Gillian Rose.

ELETTRA STIMILLI is Professor of Theoretical Philosophy in the Department of Philosophy at Sapienza University in Rome. Her work focuses on the relationship between philosophy, politics and religion, with a particular interest in gender perspectives. Her publications include *The Debt of the Living* (2017) and *Debt and Guilt* (2018). Her forthcoming book is *Philosophy of Means: Towards a New Politics of Bodies*.

NIGEL TUBBS is Professor Emeritus at the University of Winchester. He studied with Gillian Rose at Sussex and Warwick 1986–92 and has published a number of pieces on her work. His most recent work, *Socrates on Trial* (2021), was selected as a book of the year by the *New Statesman*.

Index

Andrew Brower Latz

Howard Caygill

Ed Cooper

Nicholas Gane

Louis Hartnoll

Rachel Pafe

Kate Schick

Robert Lucas Scott

Elettra Stimilli

Nigel Tubbs

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