

A work of hard love

THE EPIGRAPH to Gillian Rose's fragmentary autobiography, *Love's Work* (1995) — "Keep your mind in hell, and despair not" — could stand as the motto over her entire oeuvre, except that it would massively simplify her philosophical legacy and achievement.

Rose, who has died aged 48, was an intellectual phenomenon: writing wholly from within the tradition of modern European philosophy and social thought, she produced one of the most distinctive and original bodies of work of her generation.

She had the typically happy childhood of the precocious. She went to Ealing Grammar School and discovered philosophy at the age of 17 through reading Plato's *Republic* and Pascal's *Pensées*. Philosophy was never abstract or abstruse for her, and in these works she found that the reader was invited to undertake existential journeys which engaged the whole self, passion and reason alike. Their model of their intriguing proposals on how to live a life presented through reasoned argument, remained with her and informed both her writing and teaching.

She read philosophy, politics and economics at St Hilda's College, Oxford; but her future as a philosopher was almost aborted by the aridity of the analytical style, then at

its height. She was saved for that future in her final year of study by Jean Floud, of Nuffield College, who introduced her to sociological theory. Great possibilities for thought were opened to her.

Soon after, during a year at Columbia University in New York, her lover Jim Fessenden guided her into the labyrinth of modern continental philosophy. This rekindled her passion for the subject, which had been all but extinguished during her Oxford years. Among the discoveries of that year was T W Adorno, the leading figure of first generation critical theory; he was to be the subject of her PhD thesis and her first book, *The Melancholy Silence*, in 1978.

Some years ago, she confided one evening to a group of her students at a restaurant that she couldn't distinguish between her thought and Adorno's. This is a telling half-truth; her thought is easily distinguishable from Adorno's, but she shared with him a project; to renew the claim of Hegelian philosophy by using it as an instrument in a critique of contemporary philosophical theories and ideals.

Her second book, *Hegel Contra Sociology* (1981), is not itself a major contribution to the scholarly literature on Hegel, but it did provide Gillian with the philosophical tools she was to use in her later works.

Although there is no single label which quite describes

her thought, "Hegelian Realism" perhaps best captures it. To get a sense of what this means you have to examine her practice of writing; she was almost always a critic. And what she sought to criticise were views which described an ethical or metaphysical "purity" or, despairing of those, completely gave up on reason and morality. She thought that most contemporary philosophers were "beautiful souls" who would prefer to contemplate fixed truths and empty political utopias rather than the complications, complexities and compromises of power, of representation, of authority and of violence.

FOR the repeated and hard lessons to be found in all her writings are: the unavoidability of reason — which is always partial and difficult; the unavoidability of power, from which our knowledge can never fully separate itself; the unavoidability of violence, which does not come from external sources, but which we harbour in ourselves and risk when we act seriously; and the unavoidability of authority, which is never pure but must always be tested. There is a sense of difficulty here, and that is what I mean by Gillian's "realism".

The Hegelian part of the description comes from the way she saw that the new purisms were formed by il-

licit and Manichean dualisms — for example, love and violence — rather than recognising the complicity between these terms — that there is not only a love of violence, but there is also violence in love; that power is always entangled with knowledge, however different, power and knowledge might be.

The title of her 1992 book, *The Broken Middle*, aptly describes this situation — in which life is formed by working through of oppositions rather than adopting and suffering their abstractness. This critical position is the basis of Gillian's attack on post-structuralist philosophy, *Dialectic Of Nihilism* (1984), and her series of essays, *Judaism And Modernity* (1983), in which she questioned the capacities for growth and development in the contemporary turn to Judaism thought.

A dry run just describing the philosophical heart of her enterprise misses too much; all her works reveal an incomparable breadth of learning — in philosophy, sociology, literature, and political thought — and also that she was a writer with a unique and powerful style. Every sentence is highly wrought and inflected; a Rosean sentence is a marvel of the kind of difficulty her thought attempted to articulate. Her thinking was bold and it offered a deep challenge to contemporary European philosophy; and in response to that

thought, there gathered around her a large and inspired group of research students, first at the University of Sussex, where she taught between 1974 and 1989, and then at the University of Warwick, where she was appointed to a chair in social and political thought.

In 1983, Gillian was diagnosed as having ovarian cancer. While recuperating from a second operation — which revealed that the cancer had not been eradicated the first time — Gillian was wondering what to work on next, since she did not have the energy to tackle another large, scholarly project. I suggested she attempt to communicate, in a popular and accessible manner, the complexities she had been working through for nearly 20 years. The result, *Love's Work*, is a small miracle. It is a book about illness and death; but the lesson it tells is not how to face death, but rather how to live a human life. She would not demote cancer. To her, it represented another of life's difficulties which required work and not avoidance.

Her early death deprives British philosophy of a distinctive voice and of a project which could and did matter outside the narrow confines of its discipline.

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Gillian Rose, philosopher and writer, born September 28, 1947; died December 10, 1995