

The Independent, 13th December 1995 by John Milbank

At a quarter past six last Saturday evening, a motley group of ex-lovers, philosophers, theologians, family, graduate students and friends arrived at Coventry Hospital to witness the reception of Gillian Rose into the Anglican Church. As it turned out, they were hours late for this event, and 10 minutes too late ever to talk with her again. At a christening party that was now also a wake, they listened, numbed, as the Bishop of Coventry read to them lines of Dante's *Paradiso*, which were Rose's last bequest.

The extraordinary orchestration of events, magnetism, failure and triumph beyond failure evident in this death, integrated it seamlessly with *Love's Work* (1995), which brought her work to the attention of a larger audience.

The child of multiple marital confusions, Rose was born in 1947 and passed through Ealing Grammar School to Oxford. In New York and Germany she received her training in the traditions of Hegel and the Frankfurt school. Her published work then developed a series of positions with great consistency right to the end.

In *Hegel Contra Sociology* (1981) she demonstrated how sociology remained confined by Kantian assumptions: rigid divisions of a priori from a posteriori, law from ethics, public from private, the economic from the political, church from state, nature from freedom. More precisely than Marx, Hegel grasped how modernity itself produced these divisions which it is also fated to transgress, since they are contradictory.

In *Dialectic Nihilism* (1986), she tried to show how post-structuralists remained within the same confinement, reducing the factual to the arbitrary imposition of power, and the universal to the absolutely indifferent. She contends that post-structuralism and postmodernism do not truly refuse origins and ends, but rather "the middle", or our necessary, irresolvable hesitation between universal and particular, the one and the many. Since we are always "in the middle" we cannot determine the universe once and for all even as an antinomian lack of rule, nor can we determine the particular abstractly as the "sheerly different" or "the absolutely other".

In *The Broken Middle* (1992), written after her transfer from Sussex University to a Chair in Social and Political Thought at Warwick, this claim is set forth in detail, and extended into a critique of more "holy" versions of postmodernism, which appeal to a pure ahistorical respect for the other in opposition to all "totalisations".

For Gillian Rose this neglect of the moment of universality is tantamount to a false attempt to heal the "brokenness" of the middle. For while she denounced a facile Kantian resignation to dualisms, she equally insisted that these dualisms were essential to the modern state and modern economy, and could never be merely thought away in abstraction. To try to do so is to remain "a beautiful soul", to doom oneself always to accentuate only one side of the divide - ethics against law for example - and so to contribute to the worsening of our predicament.

Instead - and here Rose's realism places her on the side of a radical social democracy - one must persist with and defend those flawed institutions which resist our modern fractures between

public and private trade unions, local government, the civil service, the teamed professions of arts, law, architecture, education and medicine.

This passionately espoused resistance to both modest purism (the market) and anti-modernist Utopian resistance, is then upheld within *The Broken Middle* by an entire existential credo: one is to trust reason, even though it is without foundations and partial. Hence reason must be conjoined with faith, faith even in the rationality of an infinite which must elude our grasp, faith therefore in perhaps a full religious sense. Such reason with faith allows us to take the risk of action, which is always a risk of power and even of violence against the other. For without such risk there can be no generosity and no exercise of desire, whether for ideas or the goodness of persons.

Gillian Rose's own life was full to bursting with such risk, such generosity, such eros, power and violence. She did not escape the taint of ambiguity, but then her own credo refuses such escape and demands that we interrogate with suspicion apparently more untainted goodness.

She bequeaths us difficulties and mysteries. The thinker who denounces the modern Jewish retreat from law in the name of the formalism of love was finally led to embrace Christianity. We can be sure that this embrace was both difficult and dialectical, and reflect on such matters as the Incarnation of God in history, and the Protestant acceptance of the contradictory intersection of church and state, individual piety and public duty. An avowal perhaps, of an inescapably modern mode of law. Equally, the thinker who denounced any premature or even absolute healing of the middle, in her last, as yet unpublished writings, which take a more "Platonic" turn, denounces the post-modern enthroning of postponement, and denial of any consummation.

At the threshold of her own, eternal consummation, Gillian Rose leaves us to reflect further on the conditions, both political and metaphysical, under which healing may at last supersede rupture.

John Milbank

Gillian Rosemary Stone (Gillian Rose), philosopher: born London 20 September 1947; Lecturer/Reader in Sociology, Sussex University 1974-89; Professor of Social and Political Thought, Warwick University 1989-95; died Coventry 9 December 1995.

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