

Gillian Rose, 1947–1995

Gillian Rose died on the evening of 9 December 1995 after a long and courageous struggle with cancer. The hour of her death coincided with the closing moments of a conference dedicated to her work at Warwick University. Although her rapidly deteriorating health prevented her from attending as planned, the conference was inspired by the presence of her work, above all by its questioning of the division between the political and theological faces of Hegelianism.

From the beginning, in her exegesis of Adorno in *The Melancholy Science*, Rose sought a reading of Hegel free from the opposition between left 'political' and right 'theological' Hegelianism. This reading was consummately realized in *Hegel contra Sociology* (1981), for many readers her finest and most accomplished book. In it Rose insisted on the necessity of 'thinking the absolute' at the same time as elaborating an aporetic Marxist politics. The inspirational and profound scholarship of this book nourished Rose's impatience with what she increasingly regarded as a refusal by contemporary philosophy seriously to work through the difficult political heritage of Hegel. This impatience exploded in her polemical *Dialectic of Nihilism: Poststructuralism and Law* (1984), in which she attacked leading contemporary French thinkers for simplifying Hegel's thought into a totalizing system, a reduction which for Rose masked an evasion of politics, or, which was for her the same thing, a refusal to think the absolute. The polemic was continued in the essays which make up *Judaism and Modernity* (1991), in which Rose questioned what she saw as a romantic and sentimental construction of Jewish thought as the 'other' to a modern philosophical experience compromised by its association with totalitarian ideologies.

Rose's own Hegelianism was always indirectly communicated by means of masks, some of which, much to her delight, were taken at face value. Indeed, the mask and the masked are in a continual state of alternation and free play in Rose's writings, producing a parodic phenomenology which on occasion verges upon comedy. This is evident in the shifting masks of *The Broken Middle* (1992), which alternates between a careful negotiation of the dialectical aporias of violence and law and an affirmative, excessive, 'speculative' Hegelian experience figured in the intoxication of the Bacchanalian revel. The point of crossing between the dialectical and speculative directions is a sustained ironic reading of the masks and pseudonyms of the ostensibly anti-Hegelian theologian Søren Kierkegaard. A similar play with appearances also characterizes *Hegel contra Sociology*, which is dedicated to Walter Benjamin's ambiguous figure of the intriguer, thus evoking the teasingly sober scholarship of the latter's own ironic *Origin of German Tragic Drama*.

Judaism and Modernity revealed an essayistic talent which Rose developed to a point of consummate artistry in the sombre late essays that make up her posthumously published *Mourning Becomes the Law* (1996). This artistry was evident too in the remarkable *Love's Work* (1995), written under conditions of extreme dereliction following the failure of medical interventions to control her cancer. Apparently an autobiographical memoir, *Love's Work* is an exercise in affirmation, one which does not shy from the violence that comes with saying yes to life, even, or especially, in the face of untimely death.

Gillian Rose's texts live on, as do the memories of her teaching and the example she set of the pleasures of the philosophical life. Her students from Sussex and Warwick Universities will remember a tough but inspirational teacher, one whose disdain for mediocrity solicited an often painful effort to do justice to what could seem to be impossible demands. Gillian's friends will remember her ascetic hedonism and irreverence along with the fierce commitment and unstinting support which she brought to her friendships. Even close to death, Gillian was still thinking, writing and, in spite of the pain, enjoying life and the visits of her loved ones. With the passing of this extraordinary philosopher it is not only philosophy which is left the poorer.

Howard Caygill

