

Gillian Rose:
Making Kierkegaard Difficult Again

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Gillian Rose's (1947-1995) work mixes ethics, aesthetics, social theory, critical theory, and religious thought. Her mix of interests leads to a distinctive engagement with Kierkegaard's works. She approaches Kierkegaard's authorship not from the perspective of one discipline or another, but with an openness and sensitivity that is particularly useful for writing about someone, such as Kierkegaard, whose writings mix literary sensibilities, philosophical sophistication, and religious concerns. Rose does not approach Kierkegaard with a set of questions to be answered or a set of concepts to be refined. At times it seems as though she cedes her authorial voice to his, but it is in the mixing of voices, of hers and his, that new questions are opened, that what seemed settled and easy becomes troubled and difficult.

Because of her multiple academic interests, and her liminal disciplinary role (her appointments were always in sociology but her interests much broader), the influence of Rose's work remains primarily in academic niches. She is read in certain circles interested in modern Jewish thought, in critical social theory, in neo-Kantian philosophy, and in contemporary Christian theology. This last group is particularly notable because Rose, or at least the invocation of her name, has gained a certain public prominence of late amongst theologians. Rowan Williams (1950-), the current Archbishop of Canterbury, counts Rose as a leading influence on his theology. The first book on Rose

was written by Andrew Shanks, Canon Theologian of Manchester Cathedral. Its subtitle advertises a study of “Gillian Rose’s Reception and Gift of Faith”; the book begins with Rose’s deathbed conversion from Judaism to Anglicanism and reads her earlier, ostensibly secular works as foreshadowing this final moment. John Milbank (1952-) and those associated with the “Radical Orthodoxy” theological movement have pointed to Rose as a seminal influence.

This enthusiasm for Rose amongst Christian theologians, and her deathbed conversion, have led to the misconception that Rose was a theistic, or specifically Christian, thinker.¹ While Rose grappled with religious, and specifically Christian, ideas throughout her life, it was only on December 9, 1995, immediately before her death, when she could no longer speak, that she accepted the Christian faith with a squeeze of her hand.² Finally Rose had allowed Kierkegaard’s thought to penetrate her life beyond the purely intellectual realm, or so some scholars and theologians appear to argue. Of course, this final conversion could be read differently: it could be understood as Rose finally stepping away from Kierkegaard, taking the final step of worldly commitment that Kierkegaard always refused.

Rose was born Gillian Rosemary Stone on September 20, 1947 to an assimilated middle class Jewish family in London. Her interest in philosophy developed as an isolated teenager: it began as she read Plato and Pascal.³ In the works of these authors, she found philosophy fueled by passion, by *eros*. Reflecting on her early philosophical

¹ See, for example, Scott Lash, *Another Modernity, a Different Rationality*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1999, p. 10. For a general discussion, see Vincent Lloyd, “On the Use of Gillian Rose,” *The Heythrop Journal*, vol. 48, 2007, pp. 697-706.

² Andrew Shanks, *Against Innocence: Gillian Rose’s Reception and Gift of Faith*. London: SCM Press, 2008, pp. 1-2.

³ Gillian Rose, *Love’s Work: A Reckoning with Life*. New York: Schocken Books, 1995, p. 128.

interests later in life, Rose would tell an interviewer: “People say to me, ‘How do you know you’re a philosopher?’ I say, ‘There’s only one way to find out if you’re a philosopher: whether you fall in love with Socrates.’”⁴ Philosophy fueled by *eros* was not what Rose found at Oxford. She endured, then spent a year in New York, and then returned to Oxford to write a dissertation on the thought of Theodor Adorno (1903-1969). This dissertation would become Rose’s first book, *The Melancholy Science: An Introduction to the Thought of Theodor W. Adorno*, and in it Rose’s first published discussion of Kierkegaard would appear.⁵

Adorno’s *Habilitation* study of Kierkegaard, sponsored by Paul Tillich, would result in a 1933 book and would inflect Adorno’s thought more broadly. One of the distinguishing features of Rose’s study is its careful attention to Adorno’s style, and his reflections on style. According to Rose, this style is best expressed in *Minima Moralia*, Adorno’s fragmentary meditations on “Damaged Life.” While Rose does not label this work Kierkegaardian, in her reading of it she brings out familiar Kierkegaardian themes. *Minima Moralia* is written “from the standpoint of subjective experience,” it relies on “indirect methods” of communication.⁶ Rose explores Adorno’s use of irony, which she finds throughout his work but especially in *Minima Moralia*, and which she accuses Adorno’s readers of often ignoring. Among her examples of Adorno’s irony are his inversions: “The whole is the false” (Hegel), “the melancholy science” (Nietzsche), “this side of the pleasure principle” (Freud) -- and the Kierkegaardian section title, “The Health unto Death.” According to Rose, Adorno uses irony to expose the difference

⁴ “Interview with Gillian Rose,” Edited and Introduced by Vincent Lloyd, *Theory, Culture and Society*, vol. 25, 2008, p. 207.

⁵ Gillian Rose, *The Melancholy Science: An Introduction to the Thought of Theodor W. Adorno*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1978.

⁶ Rose, *Melancholy Science*, op. cit., p. 16, quoting Adorno.

between ideology and reality, to call attention to the apparently seamless fit between our view of the world and the world itself. However, in *The Melancholy Science* Rose locates the provenance of Adorno's irony in Nietzsche's works, not Kierkegaard's.

In her reading of Adorno's book on Kierkegaard, Rose brings to the fore Adorno's accusation that Kierkegaard ultimately relies on an abstraction of the individual. Kierkegaard unwittingly makes affirms a commitment to abstract equality which hides actual inequality and, consequently, allows individuals to agglomerate into a mass, destroying the individual altogether. Rose does present Adorno as sympathetic to Kierkegaard's refusal of autonomous reason. However, the dialectic which Kierkegaard attempts to replace autonomous reason with is, according to Adorno, contradictory. Kierkegaard wants to found his dialectic on the personal history of an individual but finds himself relying on "an extra-historical notion of sin as the first event of human history."⁷ The larger problem to which this antinomy points is that Kierkegaard refuses mediation, and the result is that the individual becomes "absolutised," a process also evident when Kierkegaard describes the "objectless" quality of love. Rose presents her comments as explication of Adorno's Kierkegaard book; she does not cite any of Kierkegaard's own writings in *The Melancholy Science*.

The respect that Adorno had for Kierkegaard's thought undoubtedly struck Rose, but Kierkegaard would not appear in Rose's next two books. *The Melancholy Science* is ultimately critical of Adorno, and gestures towards the need to move beyond the impasses in which his thought relishes (melancholy will become a pejorative term in Rose's later work). It is Hegel who becomes a privileged figure for Rose, and Rose's commitment to retrieving a lost Hegelianism precludes Kierkegaard from playing a role in her next two

⁷ Rose, *Melancholy Science*, op. cit., p. 64.

books, *Hegel contra Sociology* and *Dialectic of Nihilism*. Adorno struggled against being trapped in history by, for example, using irony. Rose's assessment is that the more Adorno struggled, the more he was trapped. Hegel, in contrast, is able to provide an account of his own historical location and the philosophical resources available to him. With Hegel, read rightly (Rose thinks Adorno reads him wrongly), Rose can accept the critical component of Adorno's thought but also add a constructive component which is missing from Adorno. Rose turns Adorno's criticism of Kierkegaard back onto Adorno: she accuses Adorno of neglecting "social forms" and the "social subject," the individual as part of a social and political context.

While Rose's second book, *Hegel contra Sociology*, does not mention Kierkegaard, it lays the groundwork for the explicit engagement with Kierkegaard that will be found in her later work. Her presentation of Hegel will immunize him from criticisms that Kierkegaard launches. Rose's Hegel is not "totalizing." His philosophy is not stifling, it is dynamic. Rose differs from her contemporaries, particularly her French contemporaries, who would separate Hegel's "radical method" from his "conservative system." This is the essence of her criticism of Adorno: he tries to endorse the dialectical method while jettisoning the Hegelian system that goes along with that method. Critics of Hegel are wary of the "absolute," but, according to Rose, the potency of Hegel's thought is taken away as soon as the absolute is no longer thought. Spirit just is the social structure of recognition and misrecognition. "Objective spirit" cannot be detached from Hegel's system and used to describe a given culture. "Objective spirit" is always connected with "absolute spirit," which is "the meaning of history as a whole."⁸

⁸ Gillian Rose, *Hegel contra Sociology*, London: Athlone, 1981, p. 41.

Rose puts religion front and center in her account of Hegel's thought. Her explication of Hegel's work as a whole begins with, and revolves around, an explication of a passage from the *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*: "In general religion and the foundation of the state are one and the same thing; they are identical in and for themselves."⁹ This equation of two seemingly dissimilar items is a speculative proposition, not a logical identity. The similarities and differences between the two items are worked out as social and historical detail is added. This is why Hegel's system is not "totalizing": he is employing a rhetorical strategy to demonstrate the progression of consciousness. This is also what is meant by thinking the absolute: not setting out a list of truths, or legitimizing the status quo, but acknowledging an illusion of identity and complicating that illusion. People are always mistakenly identifying the absolute and associating it with a particular social formation. Rose writes, "Religion is not the concept or thought of the absolute, but some form of its misrepresentation. As long as the absolute is *represented* as 'God', it is *inconceivable* as the absolute."¹⁰

Not only does Rose protect "religion" from what is imagined to be the totalizing grip of Hegel's system, she also inserts faith into the core of the system. Rose draws attention to passages in Hegel's *Lectures* where he suggests religion, and religious language, have been exoteric manifestations of philosophical truth.¹¹ Religious language is important simply because it is the language of *hoi polloi*. Christianity has a privileged place because in it the absolute becomes a subject, Christ. According to Rose, when Hegel calls Christianity "the absolute religion" he does not mean that the propositions of

⁹ Rose, *Hegel contra Sociology*, op. cit., p. 48, [sic] removed and grammar modified, quoting Hegel.

¹⁰ Rose, *Hegel contra Sociology*, op. cit., p. 92.

¹¹ Rose, *Hegel contra Sociology*, op. cit., p. 105. The passage in question was removed in later versions of the *Lectures*, although Rose does not note this. See Shanks, *Against Innocence*, op. cit., pp. 90-91.

Christianity are true. Rather, Christianity is a privileged configuration of exoteric representations, privileged because it points towards the speculative (not logical) proposition that the absolute is the subject.

Rose's Hegel may avoid some of Kierkegaard's criticisms, but there is still a gulf between his work and Kierkegaard's. Rose emphasizes that Hegel often writes "in the severe style," a style which "is concerned to give a true representation of its object and makes little concession to the spectator. It is designed solely to do justice to the integrity of the object."¹² Hegel, it seems, is no ironist. Moreover, Rose praises Hegel because, unlike Kant, he does not leave any realm of ignorance. This is what it means to think the absolute: it is to refuse an infinite which is unthinkable. The absent object, the unknowable, animates thought -- and distracts thought. The result: "this irrational relation to the infinite makes a rational relation to the social and political conditions of our lives impossible."¹³ Here, Rose's emphasis seems to be pushing Hegel away from, rather than towards, Kierkegaard. It will be the task of *The Broken Middle* to reconcile, or rather "work," these tensions.

Rose's writings are sometimes divided into an early and a late period.¹⁴ The early period is said to consist of her first three books, *The Melancholy Science* (1978), *Hegel contra Sociology* (1981), and *Dialectic of Nihilism* (1984). These books concerned critical social theory. They retrieve from Adorno and Hegel resources for theorizing society, and mobilize these resources against theoretical errors. Then there was a gap. Eight years later, Rose's thought had transformed. She published *The Broken Middle*

¹² Rose, *Hegel contra Sociology*, op. cit., p. 51.

¹³ Rose, *Hegel contra Sociology*, op. cit., p. 45.

¹⁴ Tony Gorman, "Gillian Rose and the Project of a Critical Marxism," *Radical Philosophy*, vol. 105, 2001, p. 25.

(1992), closely followed by *Judaism and Modernity* (1993), the memoir *Love's Work* (1994), and the posthumously published essay collection, *Mourning Becomes the Law*. In that eight year gap between the early and late works, Rose is supposed to have “found religion” -- or, more specifically, to have found Kierkegaard.

This story is more pithy than true. Rose’s interest in “existential theology” was longstanding: it predates her formal training in philosophy. The themes she explored in her book on Adorno were deeply Kierkegaardian. Moreover, the eight year publication gap is not a dark, mysterious void. As early as July 1986 Rose said that she was working on a book about Kierkegaard, a book that would be framed around the question: dialectic or repetition?¹⁵ The result that would emerge in *The Broken Middle*, Rose's *magnum opus*, was an attempt to work through how the apparent choice between Hegel and Kierkegaard could be transformed into an affirmation of both, the disjunction transformed into a conjunction.

While Rose described *The Broken Middle* as a book “on Kierkegaard,” it would seem equally appropriate to call it “Kierkegaardian.” In its structure and style, both on a superficial level and on a deeper level, Rose performed her understanding of Kierkegaard's works. The author's voice is submerged in copious quotations. The argument proceeds through juxtaposition of cited texts. Sections of the text are organized around Kierkegaardian themes: repetition, love, authority, commandment. Section titles resonate with familiar Kierkegaardian vocabulary: “Unscientific Beginning,” “Dialectical Lyric,” “Illusory Fragments,” “Confession and Authority,” and “Suspending the Political,” to take a few. Rose discusses Kierkegaard himself and juxtaposed

¹⁵ Gillian Rose Archives, Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick, MSS.377, Box 18. Rose signed a contract with Blackwell for the book that would become *The Broken Middle* in December 1987. Progress was slow but steady: in August 1989 she had completed four chapters.

Kierkegaard's texts with those of other writers who range from the expected (Hegel and Kafka) to the unexpected and provocative (Blanchot, Freud, and Lacan). These juxtapositions compose Part One of the text; Part Two consists of explorations of Kierkegaardian themes at an even greater distance from Kierkegaard's own texts. Repetition, love, and political theology organize these chapters, which range widely from discussion of Thomas Mann to Rosa Luxemburg to Franz Rosenzweig.

The Broken Middle begins, and ends, with meditations on beginning. The epigraphs to the first chapter are from Kierkegaard's *Philosophical Fragments*. They both urge, "One must just begin." One notes the difficulty of doing this, the other suggests that "it would turn out all right" if one does this, just begins.¹⁶ Rose takes this advice quite literally: she places the book's preface at the very end of the text (it still functions as a preface, offering an overview of the chapters that compose the book). The problem with beginnings, Rose suggests in "Unscientific Beginning," the first section of her first chapter, is that they function to authorize what follows. The more energy is expended in revealing, or contesting, the site and time of beginning, the greater its authority, and the more that authority overshadows what follows. Her example is Hegel, and what he overshadows is modernity. Hegel represents "System." It is what characterizes the modern, and what must be contested by those who would characterize the modern differently. Adorno, Blanchot, Levinas, Derrida, and Rosenzweig are among Rose's examples of those "standard refutations of the System in the name of an exceeding moment."¹⁷ These each promise a new beginning, but each have the effect of entrenching authority, the authority of Hegel. Modernity is supposed to be founded in opposition to

¹⁶ Gillian Rose, *The Broken Middle: Out of Our Ancient Society*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1992, p. 3.

¹⁷ Rose, *Broken Middle*, op. cit., p. 5.

religious authority, but theorists of modernity act no differently than medievals making reference to Aristotle as The Philosopher. This, Rose concludes, is irony if anything is.

The solution to this problem of beginnings is not to substitute Kierkegaard for Hegel. This would be to replace one authority for another, and ultimately to remain within the System to which Kierkegaard is supposed to respond. There is a second irony here, according to Rose. Both Hegel and Kierkegaard, when read rightly, are entirely opposed to taking exalted figures as authorities. They both commend *thinking*, the process in which the individual becomes his own author, his own authority. According to Rose, Hegel and Kierkegaard each offers himself as an example of what it means to be an author, to be an authority for oneself. This is why Kierkegaard writes with pseudonyms, so that his own name is not held up as an authority. And this is why Kierkegaard refers to Hegel as the “master” of irony: Hegel seems to do the opposite of what he says. Hegel's irony has been lost on most of his readers (including, it seems, Rose in her earlier book), just as the significance of Kierkegaard's pseudonyms has been lost on most of his.

So Rose intends to begin in the middle, by which she means rejecting the fixation on beginnings. It is hard to take Rose entirely seriously here, because this is how she begins her book, with a rejection of beginnings. She rails against taking Hegel and Kierkegaard as the beginning, and she does just that. It is not exactly with Hegel and Kierkegaard that Rose begins, but with the tension between the two: “the play of System and fragment” that exposes both their connections and their differences.¹⁸ Perhaps this offers an alternative to reading Rose as entirely ironic in her discussion of beginnings. Irony, no doubt, is part of what she intends, but at times this seems to be irony without bounds, with an effect uncomfortably close to the free play of signifiers of the

¹⁸ Rose, *Broken Middle*, op. cit., p. 9, referring to Adorno's *Minima Moralia*.

deconstructionist, one of Rose's consistent antagonists. Perhaps she intends not for the reader to wallow in irony, but rather for irony to inflate, so as to pop, convenient but wrong-headed conceptions. By over-emphasizing, over-inflating, the authority of Hegel and Kierkegaard, at the beginning, it pops, opening up options which otherwise would not have appeared. What is left is what Rose terms "the middle."

The reason that "the middle" is broken is that it is not what lies between two authorities, nor is it what remains when two authorities are deflated. Those are what Rose terms "holy middles." The "broken middle" is what becomes visible when two authorities, at two conceptual ends, are so inflated as to pop. This middle is what comes about when one has to navigate connections and differences rather than wallowing in one or the other. Rose points to ways of reading Kierkegaard to illustrate what she means. Many readers, she charges, ignore Kierkegaard's pseudonyms, attempting to reconcile the apparently conflicting claims of the works attributed to Constantin Constantius, Johannes de Silentio, Anti-Climacus, and the others with the views of S. Kierkegaard in order to form a consistent set of beliefs. Other readers, particularly those who would find in Kierkegaard a precursor to deconstruction, take the pseudonyms so seriously that each is treated as an entirely different author (not coincidentally, Rose finds the "play of personae" in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* to have the same effect, and require the same sort of investigation, as Kierkegaard's use of pseudonyms). Appreciating the middle, in this context, is to acknowledge the importance of the pseudonyms but also to struggle to make sense of their relationship to each other. Rose characterizes the middle as "difficult," the two options which it replaces as "easy."

According to Rose, in the absence of authority, what is needed to begin is faith. Indeed, Rose's account of faith is quite counter-intuitive, though perhaps no less so than Kierkegaard's, on whom Rose repeatedly draws as she develops it. Faith is what is needed when there is no authority, when there are no guarantees. If religion is understood to offer guarantees, to provide any sort of reassurance, than Rose is an advocate of what might be paradoxically termed secular faith.¹⁹ Here is where she differs from Kierkegaard: when conventional, worldly authorities are suspended, there is no higher authority that takes its place, not even a higher authority which could only be named absurd. Rose takes Kierkegaard seriously when he refers to faith as passion, and to human life as passionate.²⁰ Faith is just a capacity that humans have; there is no more to it than that.

While this account of faith may seem quite different from Kierkegaard's, or at least different in a crucial respect, Rose develops it through a shift in emphasis in her reading of *Fear and Trembling*. Against Adorno, whose reading of *Fear and Trembling* focuses on the oppositions -- spirit and nature, fulfillment and lack, aesthetic and erotic -- all of which make Abraham's sacrifice paradoxical, Rose draws our attention to the fact that nothing is sacrificed. When this is realized, we can see that the narrative is not animated by the paradoxes of the sacrifice, but the conflicts -- "story against story, crisis against crisis" -- which function to teach the reader. It teaches the reader how resignation differs from faith, how "the opposed dichotomies of loss and gain, infinite and finite, spirit and nature" which characterize resignation can be set aside in favor of the

¹⁹ See Vincent Lloyd, "The Secular Faith of Gillian Rose," *Journal of Religious Ethics*, vol. 36, 2008, pp. 683-705.

²⁰ Rose, *Broken Middle*, op. cit., p. 10.

“repetition or plenitude without possession or presence” which characterizes faith.²¹ Rose accuses Adorno of a misreading that is easy, and that makes *Fear and Trembling* easy: Adorno adopts, and attributes to Kierkegaard, the role of “resignation.” It is by recognizing the significance of the pseudonym “de silentio” that faith, as an alternative, appears. Where resignation is boisterous (it “swims”), faith is subdued, as if silent (it “floats”).

Rose's analysis of *Fear and Trembling* focuses on what the text does, and how it does it. She is interested in Kierkegaard's rhetoric, how he intends to persuade, and she takes this to be inextricable from the content of the claims that he advances. She notes how Kierkegaard commends risk. On her account, this is not the familiar risk of suspending the ethical, or at least not only that risk. Before the ethical risk comes, according to Rose, an “erotic” risk: Kierkegaard is “narrating a collision which cannot be absorbed into our infinite erotic egoism.”²² In implicit contrast to Hegel, whose story of a struggle for recognition she discusses earlier in the same paragraph, Kierkegaard examines an instance in which we are not struggling for ourselves but for someone else, someone we love even more than ourselves. Kierkegaard also takes a risk in his choice of stories. Rose notes how familiar the story of Abraham and Isaac is and how difficult it is for Kierkegaard to associate a new meaning with it: to make its meaning Hegelian or Jewish or Greek is a temptation with which the reader is confronted.

Throughout her discussion of *Fear and Trembling*, she attempts to present it as parallel to Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Both, on her readings, are texts intended to educate, to tell a story about how we came to be who we are, and in so doing to bring out

²¹ Rose, *Broken Middle*, op. cit., p. 15.

²² Rose, *Broken Middle*, op. cit., p. 16.

features of who we are which are often forgotten. Moreover, both Hegel and Kierkegaard are concerned with how “to bring Revelation into philosophy.”²³ Revelation is not transparent or “realized.” In a sense, Rose gives Revelation the opposite meaning it has in ordinary language. Revelation is the realization that no System is complete, that the work of philosophy, and ethics, is always “open and unresolved.” Revelation raises the incomprehensible to a privileged position. Revelation has an effect but no content.

The crux of Rose's reading of *Fear and Trembling* is a shift in emphasis away from the (lack of) sacrifice towards the effects of that moment. It is Abraham's willingness to sacrifice that matters, and its effect is that the text is able to draw the reader's attention to “the sublime in the pedestrian.”²⁴ Rose argues that this is happening both within the text and in the way the text is presented. The figure of Abraham is a figure of “sublime pathos,” but that pathos is already distanced from the reader through its representation. This is another parallel that Rose finds to Hegel's work: both Kierkegaard and Hegel acknowledge that absolute meaning cannot be represented so they concoct ways to use the means of representation available in order to gesture towards absolute meaning (in other words, their talent lies in understanding their role as rhetoricians, as persuaders).

This realization that the sublime mixes with the pedestrian, that pathos mixes with representation, is central to *The Broken Middle*. Its preface, located at the end, is titled “Pathos of the Concept” and suggests that the book itself is intended to make the reader witness just this. Here again is another example of the middle exposed: the sufficiency of either pathos or concept is rejected and the work of the difficult negotiation between them

²³ Rose, *Broken Middle*, op. cit., p. 18.

²⁴ Rose, *Broken Middle*, op. cit., p. 16, quoting Kierkegaard.

is begun. Such breaks as these Rose labels with the Hegelian term “diremption,” and she understands her work as an exploration of them. What is wrong with Kantians, neo-Kantians, and their followers, acknowledged and unacknowledged, is that they have an instinct to forcefully separate law and ethics. A pure ethical imperative is brought to bear on a pure representation of the world. It is this picture against which those who would “overcome Western metaphysics,” and particularly those enamored with deconstruction, respond. Their response results not in displacing the fixation on these terms but in increasing it, over and over again. They reveal a “singular, antinomian aconceptuality,” feeding a cycle in which the world appears wrong and needs to be mended.

Instead of overcoming “Western metaphysics,” Rose urges that we acknowledge diremption and engage “the difficulty of claiming the middle from the beginning.”²⁵ In place of a fixation on origins, or on locating an antinomian, aconceptual point from which to begin critique of origins, Rose urges the “agon of authorship.” Grappling with questions of authorship are central to Rose's readings of Kierkegaard: she is attentive not only to his pseudonyms, but also to his autobiographical writings. Indeed, the range of texts Rose discusses is striking: her citations include all of the expected texts, many of Kierkegaard's writings on Christianity, five volumes of his published *Journals and Papers*, as well as more obscure works such as “The Crisis of a Crisis in the Life of an Actress.” It is out of this mix of works and life that Rose develops the idea of “failing towards form.”

It is in the second chapter of *The Broken Middle*, the chapter juxtaposing Kierkegaard and Franz Kafka (1883-1924), that Rose introduces “failing towards form.” It is brought up in response to the biographical moments which seem to animate the

²⁵ Rose, *Broken Middle*, op. cit., p. 308.

aesthetic production of both Kierkegaard and Kafka. They both break off their engagements to women they appear to love, to Regina and Felice. Rose resists what much biographically oriented scholarship on Kierkegaard and Kafka has done: she resists taking these moments as “beginnings,” as inaugurating the writers’ work. By refusing to fixate on these as beginnings (while also, ironically, writing copiously about them), Rose argues that a clear-headed view of their effects becomes visible. It is out of these moments, these apparent failures, that the proliferation of authorial voices taken up by Kierkegaard and Kafka has its origin. Moreover, these moments of refusal, of apparent failure, were not really beginnings. They were the precipitate of the process of “failing towards form,” a dual movement “from the aesthetic to the ethical to the absolute, as the inability to marry; from the absolute to the ethical to the aesthetic, as the inability to write without arrogating illegitimate authority.”²⁶ Rose takes Kierkegaard’s categories and uses them to bring together all of Kierkegaard’s “authorship,” both his work and his life. His inability to marry was the result of working through a problem of aesthetics, the proliferation of authorial voices was the result of working through the biographical refusal to marry Regina. These twin movements become visible, and become possible, when we refuse the fixation on one as the beginning, as the authority. This refusal Rose names sustaining the “anxiety of beginning.” To appeal to an authoritative moment of beginning is to refuse that anxiety, which is to refuse “the middle.” Rose rather mysteriously suggests that what appears when these twin movements between aesthetics and the absolute are acknowledged, what appears in the middle, is “law.”

With this turn to law as the name of what characterizes the broken middle -- a gesture she also made in *Dialectic of Nihilism* -- Rose begins to leave the Kierkegaardian

²⁶ Rose, *Broken Middle*, op. cit., p. 53.

orbit. Although throughout *The Broken Middle* and her later work she will continue to associate herself with Kierkegaard, apparently without reservation, the appearance of law in the middle is Rose's most novel philosophical contribution. If Rose's allegiance to law is ignored, it becomes impossible to differentiate her work from the deconstructionists who she repeatedly criticizes.²⁷ Moreover, Rose's allegiance to law is what allows her to differentiate her account of the middle from the "holy middles" offered by Mark C. Taylor and John Milbank. Taylor, like Rose, imagines himself to be bringing together the thought of Hegel and Kierkegaard, to be exploring the "shifty middle ground *between*" the two.²⁸ Rose accuses Taylor of taking too seriously the opposition between knowledge and faith that he finds in *Fear and Trembling*. She accuses Taylor of ignoring the significance of Kierkegaard's pseudonymous authorship which is meant to educate rather than to propound. Third, Rose accuses Taylor of being smitten with transgression and claiming to find transgression in *Fear and Trembling* when in fact there is no transgression in *Fear and Trembling*. It is stopped before it happens. Taylor opposes "the Law" to "the Call of the Other," extolling the latter while reproofing the former.

While Taylor purports to be deconstructing theology, Milbank purports to be deconstructing "the secular." Both, Rose argues, arrive at the same point: they oppose some new Jerusalem, based on faith, to an old Athens, based on reason or law. These new Jerusalems are antinomian, characterized by "Dionysian joy," "nomadic ecclesial eschatology," "harmonious peace," by a "joy that 'breaks the power of law'."²⁹ The result is that Taylor and Milbank repeat the classic supersessionist move of opposing law and

²⁷ Milbank notes this danger, but (as one would expect based on Rose's criticisms of Milbank) does not note the mitigating role of law in Rose's work. John Milbank, "Living with Anxiety." Review of *The Broken Middle* in *The Times Higher Education Supplement*, June 26, 1992.

²⁸ Rose, *Broken Middle*, op. cit., p. 279, quoting Taylor, italics in the original.

²⁹ Rose, *Broken Middle*, op. cit., p. 218, quoting Taylor in the final phrase.

grace; in the process, they ignore the richly textured social world, which is what Rose calls the world of law. These writers would rather mend the middle, and sanctify it, than leave it broken. Here we see Rose beginning to reach escape velocity from the Kierkegaardian orbit. She takes Taylor to be misreading Kierkegaard, and associates her own position with Kierkegaard's. However, deep engagement with the richly textured social world is not a central concern of Kierkegaard's authorship, however it is conceived. Perhaps, then, it is best to return to Rose's characterization of *The Broken Middle* as a book about Kierkegaard instead of labeling it "Kierkegaardian." In *The Broken Middle*, Rose writes in her own, distinctive voice, a voice developed through her critical engagements with Kierkegaard's authorship.

The Broken Middle is Rose's *magnum opus*. Afterwards, she published two collections of essays (one posthumously) and two memoirs (one of these was also posthumously published). Her memoirs are highly stylized, and their stylization reflects Rose's philosophical thought. In a sense, she puts into practice the dual movement from aesthetic to absolute and back that she attributes to Kierkegaard. She does this most clearly in a book with an unmistakably Kierkegaardian title, Rose's memoir *Love's Work*. It is not the brink of marriage, refused, that animates Rose's aesthetic, but another "existential" moment: the brink of death. Halfway through *Love's Work*, Rose reveals that she has been diagnosed with terminal cancer. In the face of this personal turmoil, Rose wrote as she never had before, producing pellucid, engaging prose throbbing with vitality, depicting the "reckoning with life" named by its subtitle. The dense, almost impenetrable prose of *The Broken Middle*, thick with scholarly apparatus and allusive arguments made by juxtaposing the voices of others gives way to witty tales of friends,

family, and, of course, lovers. Yet there remains, in *Love's Work*, something of the allusiveness which characterizes *The Broken Middle*.

While *Love's Work* toys with Kierkegaardian themes, the conception of love it offers is quite distinct from that found in *Works of Love*. Collegiality, friendship, familial love, romantic love, and spiritual love all intermingle, barely distinguishable, in Rose's narrative. If there is a difference between these "loves," it is their degree of intensity. Each involves negotiation: in cliché, giving and taking. But Rose means more than the cliché. She means risking oneself, allowing oneself to be put in question by a proximate other. What might be called the spiritual enters love as a supplement when its intensity crosses a certain threshold. Rose depicts this in physical intimacy: "Kiss, caress and penetration are the relation of the relation, body and soul in touch... The three I harbour within me -- body, soul and paraclete -- press against the same triplicity in you."³⁰ Rose describes a love relationship much like she describes the dual movement from aesthetic to ethical to absolute and back. Playful words advance into bodily movements together which advance to ecstasy. Ecstasy becomes intimacy as lovers sleep together, and into the aesthetic as they return to their worldly lives. Through these movements, the lovers learn faith. In the morning after a night of sexual intimacy, "Eros passion is fled: its twin, the passion of faith, is taunting my head."³¹

An underlying theme of *Love's Work*, a theme that moves front and center in *Mourning Becomes the Law*, is the need to acknowledge difficulties and work through them. Again, Rose means more than the cliché. She diagnoses a human tendency to appeal to easy answers, to authorities, in short, to blind ourselves to difficulties, where

³⁰ Gillian Rose, *Love's Work*, op. cit., p. 69.

³¹ Rose, *Love's Work*, op. cit., p. 70.

blinding is, on the psychic level, repressing. On her reading, *Fear and Trembling* is intended to teach us to resist this tendency. In her last works, this tendency is diagnosed as a refusal to mourn, as melancholia. Instead of noting a loss, or an encounter with the tragic, and allowing it to inflect our worlds, our “law,” there is a tendency to disavow the tragic and so allow it to warp our worlds. This is the problem with deconstruction and much post-structuralism, according to Rose. These movements take their whole work, their whole world, to be mourning the lost certainty promised by reason, to be mourning without end. In so doing, they refuse to engage with the richly textured social world around them, instead wallowing in their melancholia (in Derrida’s case, materialized in the logorrhea of his texts).

Rose describes the choice Kierkegaard poses between the knight of faith and the knight of resignation as a choice between mourning and melancholia. The former encounters moments of the tragic, moments when it is as though ethics has been suspended, and is willing to acknowledge them, to take the leap of faith. The latter prefers “infinite pain and resignation,” he “dwells in the romance of the non-ethical.”³² The knight of resignation refuses to acknowledge the tragic, the need for the leap of faith, the need for risk. But Rose goes beyond Kierkegaard. In *Love’s Work* she suggests that the knight of faith, who is willing to “reckon with life,” is recognizable in a world of melancholia. Her descriptions of vivacious friends and acquaintances -- Yvette, a lusty grandmother who would read through all of Proust’s *A la Recherche* every year; Edna, a nonagenarian who drank heavily, refused to eat vegetables, and survived cancer -- as well as her descriptions of her own active life are contrasted with lives of infinite resignation.

³² Gillian Rose, *Mourning Becomes the Law: Philosophy and Representation*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 111.

In this group of melancholics Rose includes her own mother, who refuses to discuss the loss of many relatives in the Holocaust and who, consequently, treats her daughter cruelly (or so Rose's narrative leads us to believe).

It seems that there is a visibility to the knights of faith and resignation, on Rose's account, to which Kierkegaard might object. But in her later reflections, Rose brought this visibility into question. Rose intended to write a sequel to *Love's Work, Paradiso*; the fragments that she completed were published after her death. In *Paradiso*, Rose describes *Love's Work* as "profoundly Kierkegaardian" because "it allows one to pass unnoticed." She continues, "It deploys sensual, intellectual and literary eros, companions of pain, passion and plain curiosity, in order to pass beyond the preoccupation with endless loss to the silence of grace."³³ A long chapter in *Paradiso* meditates on Edna, a nun who befriended Rose and in whom Rose finds a kindred spirit. What Rose admires in Edna is precisely her ability to hide, to live in the silence of grace. Edna had led an active life in the world as a dancer and an enthusiast of New Age thought before entering the convent. In the convent, she studied Rabbinics as well as Christian mystical writings, with a special interest in the Song of Songs. Rose describes Edna, and herself, or at least her aspirations for herself, as one "who notices everything yet is not noticed herself."³⁴ This figure, who Rose associates with the knight of faith, as well as Agatha Christie's detective, Miss Marple, is not simply stoic. Rather, she becomes hidden and visible at once, doing what one is supposed to do, but doing it as a vocation, accompanied by the sublime.

³³ Gillian Rose, *Paradiso*, London: Menard Press, 1999, p. 17.

³⁴ Rose, *Paradiso*, op. cit., p. 18.

It would be tempting to read *Paradiso*, written shortly before Rose's deathbed conversion, as Rose coming her closest to expressing an explicitly Christian position. In *Paradiso*, she writes of Augustine (his hiddenness preserved in the *Confessions*), she writes of the theological virtues, she writes of the dangers of Gnosticism. It is tempting to see Rose finally embracing her Kierkegaardian instincts. Yet *Paradiso*, like *Love's Work*, also ponders the significance of Judaism. During that eight year publication gap, Rose was also developing an interest in modern Jewish thought.³⁵ She befriended an international group of Jewish studies scholars, and in 1988 and 1991 visited Israel. She writes of Judaism with the same combination of intrigue and skepticism with which she writes about Christianity. Judaism has been understood wrongly, on her view, the diremption between law and ethics ignored. What Jews need, Rose seems to suggest, is a more Kierkegaardian Judaism; what Christians need is a more Jewish Christianity (that is, a Christianity paying more attention to law, to the richly textured social world). Both Jews and Christians have paid too much attention to the supposed oppositions between law and grace, between law and love. Edna offers an alternative: her "mystical theology was inseparable from attention to divine and human law, to the workings of the world."³⁶

At the end of the day, when faced with the question, dialectic or repetition, Rose answers: both. In one of her last essays, on "untimely death," Rose presents Hegel and Kierkegaard as offering "two views of eternity." Kierkegaard focuses on "the crisis of Christ, the irruption of the eternal as scandal into the continuities of historical experience" while Hegel presents a "triune or trinitarian exposition of experience as

³⁵ Rose Archives, op. cit., Box 18: Rose makes reference to a book on modern Jewish thought in correspondence from January 1988.

³⁶ Rose, *Paradiso*, op. cit., p. 19.

recognition.”³⁷ Is Rose suggesting that Hegel is actually a more orthodox Christian, more Trinitarian, than Kierkegaard? Kierkegaard’s focus on the interruption of the eternal almost seems Gnostic. Rose attempts to bring Kierkegaard in line, noting how his explicitly Christian writings bring with them a trinitarian framework. But Rose is careful not to capitalize “trinitarian,” and it would be misleading to conclude that Rose finally acknowledged Hegel and Kierkegaard as the foundations for a new Christian faith which she could embrace. Quite the opposite: the trinitarian framework she finds in Hegel and Kierkegaard offers a new place to begin again, in making sense of Rose’s work, and in making sense of Kierkegaard’s significance.

³⁷ Rose, *Mourning Becomes the Law*, op. cit., p. 138.

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