Reason: Adventurous, Ambidexter, and Corrigible
On the Philosophy of Gillian Rose
“... reason, full of surprises, is adventurous and corrigible.”

Rose

The philosopher Gillian Rose died of Ovarian Cancer in 1995 at the age of 48. Due to her untimely death her philosophical project, the restoration of post-enlightenment reason as means to reflect on the dilemmas of our era, was left unfinished. In her pursuit of this restoration she published, among other works, the provocative Love’s Work: a reckoning with life, Mourning Becomes the Law: Philosophy and Representation, and Hegel Contra Sociology. Rose writes, in Love’s Work, “O reason—ambidexter implement for effecting the irrational.” She also writes: “The original plea in Kant for submission of conflicting views to public adjudication has been turned into the univocal imposition of a standard, whose very formal impartiality masks its origin in particular reason.” My current research project attempts to unwrap what Rose is claiming here and then turn it inside out to reflect on the “passional politics of the present” where one might say: “O eros—ambidexter implement for effecting the [objectively] rational.” Really this is about the Tea Party ... and the occupy movement ... and how law becomes an object of passionate interest rather than reasoned deliberation.

Gillian Rose was born in 1947 in London to a non-religious Jewish family. Her given name as Gillian Stone, but at the age of eighteen she changed her name from Stone to Rose, adopting her stepfather’s name. She was, throughout her life, a secular Jewish intellectual and, over the course of that life, became increasingly attracted to the ethical and intellectual seriousness of Jewish thought. Judaism was an essential part of her attempt to “proclaim a new testament which will dispose of the broken promises of modernity”

In her essay on Walter Benjamin, “The Beautiful Soul” Rose adds to Hegel’s objections to modernity’s placement of the individual at the absolute center of knowledge and morality the assertion that, “… the Protestant doctrine of salvation creates a hypertrophy of the inner life. Hypertrophy of the inner life is correlated with atrophy of political participation. Eventually, the interest in salvation itself atrophes, but the inner anxiety of salvation persists and is combined with worldly opportunity and ruthlessness; this combination of anxiety and ruthlessness amounts to the combination of inner and outer violence.”

The Melancholy Science, An Introduction to the Thought of Theodor Adorno (1978)
Hegel Contra Sociology (1981)
The Broken Middle: Out of Our Ancient Society (1992)
Judaism and Modernity (1993)
Mourning Becomes the Law: Philosophy and Representation (1996)

Many thinkers of the recent past view philosophy and its resort to reason (vernunft) as having failed them in the extraordinary crises of the twentieth-century. Rose recognizes and reconstructs this sense of having been abandoned by a tradition that had made such spectacular promises. She presents an analogy. “Suppose a friend whom you trust more than any other, who taught you the meaning of friendship, lets you down suddenly, and then, persistently, ceases to fulfill the expectations which, over the years, you have come to take for granted, and which, without your being aware of it, act as the touchstone for all your other friendships.” She presents a number of alternatives. Giving up all friends. Changing expectations of all friends. Giving up all particular friends. She sees each of these alternatives as “impoverishing the idea of friendship;” as “acts of destruction” that “rest on false premises concerning the meaning of friendship.” Rather she sees a need for “conversation, engagement that arises from having enough self-trust and mutual trust to renegotiate the friendship, given the ever-shifting possibility of misunderstanding, of unanticipated difficulty.” Then she asks us to “substitute ‘reason’ for ‘friendship’.”

Rose’s view is that the post-modern and the anti-modern abandonment of reason is based on two basic errors. The first error characterizes reason as “intrinsically necessarily and incorrigibly exclusive.” The other error asserts “the claim of the excluded party against restricting and restricted reason.” These errors misrepresent both reason and the alterity of reason. The alterity of reason is misrepresented because in post and anti-modern thought the “Other whose claim is redressed against reason is, ipso facto, utterly unequivocal and totally justified by the long overdue act of assertion.” This alterity sets a new absolute and authoritative Other against the old absolute and authority reason. Such alterity subjugates anew and fails to “bring to light what is difficult out of darkness and silence.” The loss of the difficult, the certainty placed on that which is uncertain is, for Rose, the source of subjugation. This setting of the Other in opposition to reason is itself a misuse of reason. It denounces the limitation of reason through “the self-same reason that is simultaneously discreditted for its exclusivity and employed in its own enlargement.” (JM, 5) Rose sees the complaint that is being made against reason as a complaint against a particular understanding and use of reason. Her understanding of reason is of a Reason that does not dominate the difficult through the absolutes of certainty. Reading Reason through Hegel and Adorno, but also through Kierkegaard, Marx and Nietzsche, Rose’s reason is “relational, responsive and reconstructive.” To characterize reason as merely “dualistic, dominant and imperialistic” demonizes reason. Reason, like true friendship is “always pervaded with meanings neither party intends” The concept of friendship that emerges from the pain and the lessons of experience is dynamic: it connotes the unanticipated outcome of idea and act; and yields the actuality of the concept, not its alterity. To present experience, with its welcome and unwelcome surprises and with its structure, is the work of reason itself, its dynamic and its actuality.”