

Paradiso

BOOKS BY GILLIAN ROSE

The Melancholy Science:

An Introduction to the Thought of Theodor W. Adorno (1978)

Hegel contra Sociology (1981)

Dialectic of Nihilism: Post-Structuralism and Law (1984)

The Broken Middle: Out of Our Ancient Society (1992)

Judaism and Modernity: Philosophical Essays (1993)

Love's Work: A Reckoning With Life (1995)

Mourning Becomes the Law: Philosophy and Representation (1996)

Paradiso (1999)

Gillian Rose

Paradiso

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Preface

Gillian Rose enjoyed the reputation of being a difficult author. Her first book, *The Melancholy Science* (1978), masqueraded as an *introduction* to the thought of T. W. Adorno, but readers looking to be introduced were quickly dismayed. The knotty prose and the involved analyses of style and reification were definitely not for beginners. Rose relished hearing stories from defeated readers of her first work, and would crown them with the information that it began life as a commission to write a *cooking* book. Her next book, *Hegel contra Sociology* (1981), combined a close study of the neo-Kantian origins of sociology and a reconstruction of the development of Hegel's thought in a synthesis that proved formidable even for those readers familiar with the arcana of Hegel scholarship. Her polemic against post-structuralist thought in *Dialectic of Nihilism* (1984) and her reflections on Kierkegaard in *The Broken Middle* (1992) in their different ways conformed to a level of philosophical difficulty that deterred many potential readers.

The recourse to a difficult style did not arise from an incapacity to write clearly—as testified by the limpid essays that make up *Judaism and Modernity* (1993) and the posthumous *Mourning Becomes the Law* (1996)—but reflected the working through of the intrinsic difficulty of a 'trauma within reason itself'. In the preface to the second edition of *Hegel contra Sociology*, Rose traced the aetiology of the trauma of reason and her difficult negotiation of it to 'the

dilemma of addressing modern ethics and politics without arrogating the authority under question', a dilemma which provoked the 'ineluctable difficulty' which she found played through in 'Hegel, Nietzsche and Kierkegaard's engagement with modernity'. The same negotiation of trauma is performed in the deceptively not-difficult *Love's Work* (1995), where the existential drama is explored lyrically through the experience of imminent death, couched in sentences whose rhythms esoterically allude to Shakespeare, Burton and Jonson. Rose relished the irony that it was *Love's Work*—her most difficult and esoteric act of indirect communication—that gave her popular success.

In the fragments of the unfinished *Paradiso*, published here for the first time, Rose continued to play through what she called the 'existential drama' provoked by the difficulties of modern ethics and politics. The work was conceived as a procession of twenty-one personae and themes, each provoking an affirmation of the difficulty of leading an ethical life under modern conditions. The few chapters that Rose was able to bring to a publishable state show a serenity and beauty that was always present in her work but rarely permitted their full voice. They are here published as her final word.

HOWARD CAYGILL

The flower
Sex, death and beauty
All in one



There is a film from 1937, directed by Irving Thalberg called *The Good Earth* and based on the novel by Pearl Buck. In this film Chinese peasants, normally eking out a living at subsistence level, are suddenly blessed with a bountiful harvest. Their response to their unexpected good fortune is to find it almost unbearable; they are terrified by its abundance. Without deliberate decision, the community pretends to itself that the crop is as bad this year

as ever, in order mystically
to protect its precarious gift.

This is a book about

the good earth:

it is my

Paradiso.



I have decided that I too will be *difficult* for a few minutes.

It concerns your eloquent analysis of King Arthur's dream of Camelot with its tragic and inevitable outcome of sadness, no matter what choice he makes. The law that he has sworn to uphold will always rebound against his human weakness, whether or not he fulfils or ignores its requirements. However, as my wife Barbara and I read this, Barbara pointed out to me that there is a third scenario. What Arthur could have done is to pass sentence on Guinevere and Launcelot, but then offer to die in her place. In this way he would fulfil the just requirement of the law, liberate the two he loved and probably save the kingdom.

From a letter to me from

DR TOM AND MRS BARBARA GOODFELLOW

5 February 1995

Edna or the Song of Songs

MYSTICAL THEOLOGY

Rabbi Akiba said: 'Had the *Torah* not been given, the *Song of Songs* would have sufficed to guide the world.'

When I innocently and joyfully conveyed to Sister Edna that I was planning to write about her, the vehemence of her response took me utterly by surprise. She claimed that she would be ruined with her community, a closed community, which would feel that their trust in giving her permission to pursue her work on the *Song of Songs* had been betrayed. She wrote to me, 'What we are all committed to is a life of prayer in hiddenness. Against that I count my work on the *Song* as nothing'. And since then my love of her and my sense of the truth have been in deep travail.

My more or less immediate response was to point out to Edna that she represents to me the St Bernard of my *Paradiso*. In Dante's *Divine Comedy*, St Bernard is to be found at a higher terrace in Paradise than St Thomas Aquinas; for, to Dante, St Bernard expresses the love of God, while St Thomas expresses the knowledge of God. St Bernard also wrote a commentary on the *Song of Songs* in the form of eighty-six sermons. The symbolic analogy with Edna seems

precise; while her whole life-story closely parallels and modernises the dilemmas and the goodness of St Augustine. It was the desire to communicate her radiant goodness that gave birth to this whole work in which I am engaged.

Edna replied to my reference to St Bernard with alacrity: 'If I am your St Bernard that should make this easy. Bernard was *really* tough. Do you know the story of how, when he was preaching on one occasion, a blackbird flew into his face and, taking it by its wings, he tore it in two, commenting, "that is the last time you will fly in the face of God's word"?'

The violence of this threat to me opens up a surprisingly fruitful didactic.

In his *De Laudibus Virginis Matris* (On the Praise of the Virgin Mother, Migne *Patrologia*, vol. clxxxii, col. 56), St Bernard described the sacramental relation of the visible to the invisible world: 'full of supernal mysteries, abounding each in its special sweetness, if the eye that beholds be attentive'. This applies to the mystery of the blackbird as well, to the mystery of Edna's hiddenness, and to the mystery of St Bernard.

St Bernard was the most adamant and powerful man: he began preaching the Second Crusade in the Cathedral at Vezelay on Palm Sunday 1146; he silenced Abelard's anticipation of the rediscovery of Aristotelian logic; he opposed (unsuccessfully) Suger's plans for the first Gothic Cathedral, at St Denis, north of Paris, when Suger, who had accompanied the King, Louis VII, to Vezelay to hear St Bernard preach the Crusade, returned inspired more by the potentialities of Vezelay's architectural form for an urban and regal setting than by the call for the Crusade.

Bernard's combination of political power and spiritual humbleness, his combination even of the pride of preaching and the solitary devastation of prayer, are not mutually reproducing dialectical contraries that, in a superficially wise way, might be referred to a soul out of touch with its different strata. Let us leave it for the moment as the mystery of Bernard's visibility and his hiddenness.

How could St Bernard, the Mellifluous Doctor, be sure though, how can we know, whether it is not the blackbird who, with special sweetness, sings the Word of God?

I first met Sister Edna when waiting outside the Oxford Playhouse for a coach arranged for Jonathan Webber's first Frank Green lecture on 'The Future of Auschwitz', which was taking place late one afternoon in January 1992 at Yarnton Manor, the sixteenth-century manor house currently occupied by the Oxford Centre for Postgraduate Hebrew Studies. Edna cut a striking figure and presence. Acknowledged by many people as they arrived, she strode from person to person, lofty in height, wearing a habit that could have come straight out of a Counter-Reformation painting: thick woollen material in Vandyke brown, swirling to the ground, surmounted by a white coif covering the hair and ears, the bleached rope around the waist with the piece hanging towards the knees bearing the three widely spaced prominent knots symbolising the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience.

I sat next to Edna on the bus and told her I had just published a book on Kierkegaard (*The Broken Middle*). She had read Kierkegaard's aesthetic and religious authorship. From the beginning I liked Edna's combination of keen intellectual presence and unfathomable piety: she relishes

expressing unfashionable opinions as dogmatic truths, and, if challenged, will reason out her position without inhibition.

From the first we had Kierkegaard between us. Now, *Love's Work* is a profoundly Kierkegaardian work: it allows one to pass unnoticed. 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. Miss Marple is the code-name for this movement from loss to grace: Miss Marple is both exactly what she appears to be—a fiery, nosy, old lady—and something *transcendent*, someone who notices everything yet is not noticed herself. As a result she is not a ‘person’ in the psychological sense: she has no individual pathos, no desire to win the affection of others in order to assuage her own difficulty. She represents Nemesis—justice. Transcendentally, she is a ‘person’ in Polanyi’s definition: ‘To be a person is to be in the image of another Truth and to receive it and grow into it.’ This Truth is the unpredictable outcome of the passion and pain of the characters in each murder mystery.

Miss Marple is what Kierkegaard calls a *knight of faith*, as distinct from what we mostly are most of the time—*knights of resignation*. The knight of resignation IS recognisable: she cherishes her misfortunes, remaining loyal and dedicated to the mists of memories. She clearly lives companioned by ghosts: family, friends, loves and lovers. The knight of faith, by contrast, moves behind this all-too-human stoicism: she lets her lost ones go, whether injured or injurious, and turns her attention to the astonishing nature of what is normally expected until she becomes both invisible, hidden, and quite ordinarily visible.