

Gillian Rose was born to a secular Jewish family in England in 1947, and died there in 1995 from complications of ovarian cancer, baptized, it is said, on her deathbed, by Simon Barrington-Ward, then the Anglican Bishop of Coventry and her long-time friend. She was a child of divorce who changed her name at sixteen from Stone, the name of her forbidding father, to Rose, the name of her loving stepfather; that name-change, with all its symbolic resonance, she writes, "served as my bat mitzvah, my confirmation as daughter of the law." That confirmation drew her not to the practice of Judaism, but to an academic career: she was educated at Oxford, where she read philosophy, politics, and economics, and during her life she published five hermetically difficult books on hermeneutics, Hegel, and political theory. Three more, transparently lucid by comparison, have appeared since her death, including *Love's Work*, the book under discussion here.

As a twentieth-century Jewish woman fascinated by Christ, and as a writer and thinker of unnerving intensity, Rose has much in common with Edith Stein and Simone Weil, though she is of the generation after theirs. Stein, martyred by the Nazis, is now a saint of the Catholic Church and may soon be recognized as one of its doctors. Weil, who was unable, finally, to accept baptism, partly because of a deep strain of anti-Semitism in her own thought (she believed Christianity was too Jewish), martyred herself by starvation. Rose, like them, died young. Like them, too, she is one of the most significant philosophical voices of the twentieth century. In my judgment, her achievement is greater than either of theirs—and, her life and work, like theirs, are beginning to interest people outside the academy.

This interest is largely attributable to *Love's Work*, which was first published in 1996 and had been completed not long before Rose's death the preceding year. The book, which has just been reissued by New York Review Books, is short, episodic, and loosely autobiographical. If you haven't read Rose before, this is the book to begin with. To the attentive reader it offers a precise and utterly unsentimental depiction of what it's like to be a human being in love.

The book depicts some of the people Rose loved and took to be exemplary of love. She is, she writes, "highly qualified in unhappy love affairs," and she doesn't mean only those that involve sex. For her, all love affairs are unhappy: not *only* unhappy, but at least that. Her longest and most painful love affair was with being alive; for her, that ended in surgery and chemotherapy and pain. Rose doesn't think her suffering unusual; she has learned from Pascal that everybody's final act is bloody no matter how fine the play in which they've performed, and that it's a damaging mistake to pretend otherwise. In writing as she does about her own physical sufferings, she manages to show that they are at once an unendurable insult to the flesh and capable of transfiguration.

Rose presents the horrors of life as causes not for despair but for lament, which is something very different. The book's epigraph, from Staretz Silouan, a Russian Orthodox monk who died in 1938, is "Keep your mind in hell, and despair not." And Rose might well also have quoted the response of Marlowe's Mephistopheles to Faustus's question about how it is that devils can leave hell to appear to and tempt those on earth: "Why this is hell, nor am I out of it," says Mephistopheles, and Rose thinks the same, though for her hell is a place of mourning, not of despair. True despair—the frozenness-in-place of Dante's Satan in the *Inferno*, for example—is a stasis that makes mourning, and therefore love, impossible. Lament is among love's chief works; that is a constant theme in Rose's writing. She applies it to political theory in another posthumously-published work,

*Mourning Becomes the Law* (1996). Understanding the connection between love and lament in this way makes possible a deep compassion for others and oneself, and this is evident throughout *Love's Work*, a good part of which is taken up with loving portraits of people who have loved well.

There is, for example, Edna, a New Yorker born at the end of the nineteenth century (Rose meets her in 1991, when Edna is ninety-three) who has been an alcoholic, suffered from cancer of the face, had a long and unhappy marriage, and who has a false nose that she sometimes forgets to attach in the mornings. Edna has “not been exceptional. She has not loved herself or others unconditionally. She has been able to go on getting it all more or less wrong, more or less all the time.” But in Rose’s eyes Edna is an angel because she is alive with love and welcome, and that aliveness is an effect of her clarity about her own shortcomings. Her welcome to Rose in the New York of the 1990s offers a “redoubled home that has no colour or cathexis of pain inseparable from its welcome.” The pain is not sequestered; it remains ingredient to life. Edna sees clearly, and laments what she sees. Rose’s love is aroused by this. Her contempt (not too strong a word: it is her contemptuous tone when she writes of the comfortable bourgeoisie, and, sometimes, of her own mother, that provides the few false notes in this book) is for those who, shunning Edna’s clarity and mourning, live in “static despair.”

Then there is Yvette, a divorced Englishwoman who has many children and grandchildren and has had many lovers. She loves Proust and Yeats for their depictions of desire and sensual pleasure; and Swinburne for his clarity about how those things end (“Laurel is green for a season / And love is sweet for a day / But love grows bitter with treason / And laurel outlives not May”). In her sixties Yvette falls for and pursues a man thirty years younger than she, with no concern for her dignity or for the proprieties. She dies of breast cancer not long after, and Rose’s judgment of her is that she is a “superior being,” principally because she refuses to withdraw from the theater of desire and pain into a realm of static safety. Yvette is aggressively vulnerable, “completely devoted to pleasure without guilt,” and endlessly interested in poetry and in the bodies and minds of others. Those, in Rose’s view, are features of a good lover, and that they bring humiliation and suffering with them is no reason to abandon or nervously constrain them.

And there is Patrick, a Jesuit with whom Rose falls in love and has a sexual affair. He is depicted more negatively than Edna or Yvette because he is more subject than they to the desire for control, a desire that Rose objects to as much in medicine as in affairs of the heart. She uses the end of her affair with Patrick as an occasion to focus her thought more tightly upon the functions of grief, and upon the problems attendant upon seeking comfort for it. Rather than comfort, she wants to sob and shriek, and to go on doing so until she discovers “what it is that I want and fear from love.” She wants to learn not only how to be not only the Beloved, but also the Lover. She doesn’t say so, but the capital letters suggest that she is thinking about love as it is depicted in the Song of Songs. That connection becomes explicit in the third of her posthumous works, *Paradiso* (1999).

Rose’s depiction of the treatment she gets for her cancer is ethnographic as much as personal. She contrasts the orthodoxies of conventional medicine, which aim at control and wash their hands of the matter when control fails (as it always eventually does), with the banalities of alternative medicine, which speak the “exoteric language of cosmic love” and aim at the dissolution of pain and the removal of lament. Conventional medicine is the tool of those who do not know how to die and will do anything they can

to prevent their patients dying; alternative medicine is the device of those who pretend that suffering does not exist and that death is an illusion. Both, for Rose, are rebarbative. Better to embrace of the “intensified agon of living,” whether that agon has to do with the sufferings of the body, the emotional and spiritual agonies of love lost, or the blood and injustice of politics. That embrace is neither perfectionist nor meliorist: it does not pretend that all can be made right, or made better. Such approaches to suffering are, for Rose, blind to the fallenness of the world. They substitute a technology of improvement for love, and they fail because they disengage the subject from the world. Only love can maintain engagement.

Rose’s thought on these matters implies that withdrawals from the broken world, like those of the Amish or some Orthodox Jews, fail because they refuse the mourning required of love: they outsource it. It also implies that utopian programs for suffering-reduction, whether of the market or the Marxist or the therapeutic or the technological variety, avoid love’s work because they focus only on success.

Lament is not love’s only work. There is also laughter, which is the other side of sadness in Rose’s thought. In a compressed and highly suggestive passage toward the end of the book, she depicts the connections among metaphysics, ethics, and the divine comedy in the following way: Metaphysics is perplexity, “the perception of the difficulty of the law,” which means, roughly, the difficulty of moving from high abstraction to practical application; ethics is exactly that movement, a movement toward justice, which always and necessarily falls short, and which moves precisely to the extent that it sees and laments its inevitable failure; and the divine comedy is exactly that condition, “the ineluctable discrepancy between our worthy intentions and the ever-surprising outcome of our actions.” Rose points here to a kind of certainty. It is certainty about the inevitability of a “mismatch between aim and achievement,” and this condition may lead as often to laughter as to lament. Such laughter is purgatorial, not cynical.

The image of purgatory nicely captures the tone and feeling and substance of the whole book. Purgatory is a condition of suffering, but with confidence of final liberation from suffering into paradise. Hell without despair, it turns out, just is purgatory. It is where we all live, in every aspect of our lives, personal, sexual, social, political, and intellectual, and Rose is a poet and philosopher of that painful place. There are few like her, and perhaps none as intense.