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On the Paraethical: Gillian Rose and Political Nihilism

Gillian Rose, as a strict Hegelian, was a thinker of the primacy of the political. From the beginning to the end of her remarkable *oeuvre*, she targets remorselessly the dangerous self-deceit of those who try to think away this primacy – in favour of the alternative primacy of the social, the ethical, the individual, the linguistic or the religious. Human life is fundamentally and overwhelmingly political, and this means that it is based at once in the violent imposition of the power of some human beings over others, and in a claim for the legitimacy of this power. There is force and there is law: they are not identical to each other, but they assume each other. Violence is at once external and internal to law; law is at once internal and external to violence. Law intrudes an ideal dimension, but if we imagine that this is completely self-commanding and free of arbitrary presuppositions, then we sink into an apolitical morality which is an illusion. Conversely, if we imagine that there is there is an entirely material social process, originally free of self-justification, then we also delude ourselves; human temporal existence is problematically caught between the real and the ideal[1].

And what is more, these two overly abstract ways of conceiving the historical process are collusive: the more that Marxism imagines mere material determination, then the more it also nurtures the "Fichtean" and ultimately utopian fantasy of an imposition of an ideal order out of a whole spiritual cloth upon an essentially obedient material substrate. Nor are the real and the ideal dimensions simply in a connective tension with each other. Instead, this tension invades their respective substances,

[1] See mainly Rose (1981), Rose (1992) and Rose (1997).

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to ensure that all is (mis)governed yet truly governed by *diremption*. Historical subjectivity is and is not itself an alienated and fantasised substance, like the commodity fetishism diagnosed by Marx[2]. Conversely, the apparently purest pursued ideal always conceals some sort of bias or interest that is in hock to the very thing it most apparently opposes, such as contemporary claims to community self-government or sheerly "emergent" churches (interestingly already named by Rose in the 1990's), which uncritically reiterate the very naturalism and innocence which is projected upon the entire realm of civil society by its diremption away from the more ideal state, which nonetheless supposedly exists only to uphold and support it[3]. In this way, materially acting subjectivity is always self-rent and then rent again.

Equally, when one considers the side of the projected transcendent ideal in itself, then we discover a diremption between law and the ethical. No purely moral account of legality tends to hold, because of its obvious grounding in circumstance and subordination to the pragmatic interests of governing states. Yet neither can legality, precisely if it is to prove acceptable, altogether lose its onlook towards the ethical. From the other side of the picture, the ethical tends to be construed, after Kant and Fichte, as a pure reciprocal upholding of human freedom, giving rise to absolute notions of subjective rights; yet in practice these can prove either empty or incompatible, or else as banally promoting the mere cessation of cruelty or emancipation of yet another hitherto neglected racial, gender, sexual or disabled minority, whose significance and boundary as an identity is just assumed, as Rose notes, despite its lack of formal grounding[4]. Morality so construed cannot tell us how to live, what goals to pursue as individuals or groups, nor how to coordinate different legitimate desires.

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[2] See Rose (1981), pp. 92-120.
[3] See Rose (1992), pp. 247-347; see Rose (1997), pp. 1-13.
[4] See Rose (1992), pp. 153-246.

In order to answer these questions, for Rose as for Hegel, one must fall back upon historical reflection, revert from morality to law and to law as an agonistic integration of the ideal with the real. Then we will see that how we are to live, and with what vocations, is largely already given, if we are able to understand our own time and its ineluctable arrival from the past. Our primary practical job is exhaustively a theoretical and philosophical one – namely to escape the twin and mutually collusive illusions of a merely material and a merely ethical vision of the real. Then we shall see that our life in contemporary time is not mechanically determined, but is nevertheless rationally determined such that we can live freely in due and assigned measure, which includes a working through of what remains problematic and undetermined, since the latter residue lies, paradoxically, at the very heart of the nonetheless fated. It is a call neither to revolution, nor to drastic reform, but to a sober exercise of responsibility within a horizon that is in part constituted by ideals that cannot be fulfilled but must never be abandoned. Love's work appears to be the willingness to fail again and then to mourn, and so after all eternally to reclaim the ideas and people that remain, in time, forever unfulfilled[5].

In order to grasp what Rose means here, it is crucial to realise that she is a strictly modern thinker. Her apparent refusal of deontology does not at all means that she wishes to revert to the wisdom of the ancients, like Strauss or Macintyre, nor even to the more free, equal and interpersonal reworking of virtue by the Christian Middle Ages. Therefore she is not arguing that being, including temporal being, insofar as it exists at all, is good, nor that ethics concerns a grasp of the right way to be and therefore the constitution of a true natural social or political order, in harmony with the rest of nature. Such an order is not, for Rose, hidden from us by the resources of evil or sin, but inherently does not exist at all, because there is a primal rupture between the actual and the ideal, even though there is also a primal connection. For this reason she openly equates, and not without

[5] See Rose (1997), pp. 125-146.

very good exegetical reasons, the political perspective of Hegel with that of Machiavelli, Nietzsche and Weber. Christian protology and Christian eschatology are both, by Rose, explicitly refused in *Mourning Becomes the Law,* and instead the virtue espoused is a modern virtue which asserts the ontological reign of "power before ethics", a power which can be but retrospectively moralised, in terms of one's loyalty to a political project and celebration of the earthly deeds of the human will to power whose precondition of nobility is death, and an immanently immortal defying of death's nocturnal horizon. Rose only lapses into prevaricating sentiment when she ascribes to Nietzsche's joyful need for and indifferent non-despising of enemies a Christian love for the same[6].

Perhaps most striking of all is her embrace of Weber's austere resignation to the modern condition: the semi-lament of substantive truth and goodness, and yet at the same time the overwhelming exaltation of the stoic grandeur of those prepared to accept the liberal sway of merely formal agreement in the public sphere: for Rose accurately sees that Hegel only qualifies this formalism in terms both of its specific historical fatedness and the consolatory imagining by the isolated individual of his role in the impersonally organic machine of the state, as mediated by the division of labour and the role of guilds and corporations which allow, for Hegel, a kind of *gemütlich* collective festive reflection of this truth, amongst workers and settled communities[7]. (Germany today is perhaps a strange mixture of this fake, state-market sentimental corporatism that oils the wheels of a neo-liberal nationalism, with more authentic guild and craft survivals).

To say this, is to say that, for Rose, mediation is always and remorselessly broken, and can only operate in reality *as* broken. There is to be found here absolutely no associationist or subsidiarist advocacy of the restoration of the role of mediating institutions. Indeed, one could even argue that a refusal of any

[6] See ivi, pp. 77-100 and pp. 125-146.
[7] See Milbank (2006), pp. 170-176.

such possibility as fond fantasy is virtually the heart of Rose's political thought. Her crucial political and philosophical notion is that of "the broken middle", and in the apparently very complex book of that title, the last chapter in fact tells us in very direct and simple terms just what she means by this.

In a long citation of Karl Mannheim, Rose recounts how, under the "feudal" order, there existed an apparently unbroken and so straightforward and genuine mediation. Persons were defined and existed in terms of their belonging to relatively self-enclosed and self-governing communities: whether manor, township, monastery or guild. They enjoyed no direct relation to, nor participation in the governance of, kingdoms or republics. And yet, their communities themselves exercised and contributed to specifically political rule. For this reason, there existed no alienation between the most intimate, spiritual and existential aspect of people's lives and their relationship to public governance. There was, in principle, no diremption between being and order, vocation and ideal, nor law and final human aspiration. The micro-community symbolically imaged the macro; the macro-community the cosmos; and all of these things the divine government itself[8].

But for Rose as for Mannheim, such a middle of analogical mediation is now ineluctably broken and cannot conceivably be restored, nor even re-invented in a new guise. This is at once for metaphysical and historical reasons and both together -- in an Hegelian fashion. For Hegel, in keeping with Leibniz's principle of sufficient reason, we must take the real to be rational and the rational real. In consequence, the drastic modern undoing of the feudal order is inevitable and disclosive: it reveals to us that there truly exist no "separate" and substantive transcendent sources apart from us and over-against us, which might be finitely reflected and embodied in a social order. Beyond the old neoplatonic flow back to the One from the reflecting Many, we now see that the One resides only in the Many, whose very existence is provided by its random variety and arbitrary and

[8] See Rose (1992), pp. 300-301.

therefore variously violent insistence. As for Hobbes, Locke, Kant, Rousseau and Fichte in albeit varying ways, there exist only individuals, formally mediated by modern right, which is no longer substantive law.

However, there is for Hegel a difference, as starkly brought out by Rose, in the wake of the Frankfurt school writers who initially inspired her. Even a formal agreement remains a universal one and its relation to particular exemplifications continues to be aporetic: for example, do concrete particulars essentially realise the formal universal, or does the latter reflect their natural and pragmatic interactions? The new, modern person is first of all a private individual, and yet he is only commanded and enabled to be such by the collective state and market. He is at once and problematically at first natural and given, and yet also cultural and constructed. For this reason – and here is the key element in Hegel's somewhat ambivalent stance towards enlightenment – mediation is not simply abandoned by modernity; rather it is broken, and modernity has continued to be founded not on its own vaunted idealised beginning but in this wrecked and but apparently refused medium. In other words, since identity is, after all socially given, and inversely the social order is psychic, individuals have still to relate their private to their public identity and government cannot entirely refuse either anthropology or the ordering of souls.

But what exactly does this mean in terms of concrete institutions? One can infer that, for Rose, modernity continues to be constituted by mediating orders which it nevertheless continuously tends to pull apart: by economic firms, by hospitals, by schools, universities, professional associations, the arts and the media. When she is rightly condemning those who undialectically assault political power as "totalising", she points to the circumstance that every increase in individual freedom tends to involve a concomitant increase in police powers (as recommended by Fichte) in default of the consequent lapse of

tacit-group ordering and the increased clash of will with will[9]. And yet, she provides no expected balancing political demand to shore up the power of corporate, intermediate bodies -- as if, for her, in modernity there were no real chance of boosting them beyond their Hegelian, somewhat ideologised function of phantom integration and reassurance.

The discussion of architecture is here crucial, as it concerns the usage of all "intervening" human space. Communitarian building projects are excoriated, on the insightful grounds that they assume the given innocence of popular taste and demand, and the absence of division between controllers and controlled at a local level. No real middle is here espoused, but rather an impossible local and natural spontaneous irruption. This is designated by Rose a "holy middle", because it is supposed to heal diremption without any analysis of why it holds and why it must at least be lived through, and in fact can never be genuinely escaped. The raw nature of civil society engineered by both capitalism and bureaucracy is thereby just reiterated in celebrated fantasy.

But on the other hand, for Rose the project of architectural modernism (even though she finds this more personally sympathetic) is equally an attempt to impose a "holy middle" in its effort to mediate between excess of form and formlessness and to reimpose in a stark Nietzschean guise a specifically claimed and counter-romantic, anti-historicist, alternatively "gothic" Thomistic unity of formal beauty with moral purpose. This project was intended to fit person to environment and so to social order. But for Rose this is but a supreme instance of *sollen*, of Fichtean formal imposition, ignoring the vagaries of circumstance that cannot be willed away[10].

So on the one hand, the communitarian holy middle fails to see that real people live in time and in relation to powers beyond and above them; thus to deny them aesthetic education in the

[9] See Rose (1981), pp. 31-42 and pp. 212-218.
[10] See Rose (1992), pp. 296-307.

name of populism is actually to disallow their potential democratic, mediated role. But on the other hand the modernists are pseudo-educators, treating real subjects as if they were a formless matter to be instrumentally moulded.

The obvious question here would be, why cannot there be an architectural third way, a mediation of high with folk culture? But significantly this possibility is *not* considered by Rose and nor does she ask whether, in fact, the existing role of Prince Charles (then and now) could be potentially to do with just that. For he is mockingly seen by Rose as merely an anachronistic relic, whose role in the architectural debate can only be one of allegorical disguise of realities. Yet the problem here is that monarchy, like all continuing rule by sovereign heads of state, is arguably in just the same predicament as the persistence of corporations – in either case there is allegorical disguise of modern power, to be sure, but on Rose's own contention this disguise is *essential* to socially-constituting diremption itself.

However, her analysis can probably accommodate this objection. If her main point is that, given the necessity and yet the impossibility of mediation, modernity must of necessity given rise to "holy middles", then Charles as their patron is just as modern as he is fantastic – he may be comic, but he is inevitable, if one stands back from mere *Guardianesque* derision. Monarchy and other archaisms are not mere illusions, but are rather destined, in their modes of inevitable yet futile reaction, to pull the poles of diremption further apart – as with the contrast between community and modernist architecture, with either being potentially supportable by state auspices. Thus the overwhelmingly bleak conclusion of the last chapter of *The Broken Middle:* «The more the middle is dirempted, the more it becomes sacred in ways that configure its further diremption»[11].

It is no use reading this sentence (as it is often so read) as if it were merely an ethical, or even a negatively theological injunction to refrain from construing holy middles, since this will only further the damage of brokenness. For Rose is rather

[11] See ivi, p. 307.

saying that, just because dynamic temporal mediation remains constitutively necessary to any human society (her one anti-sociological "sociological" thesis, if you like – since it denies either a Durkheimian *a priori* foundation in the ahistorical social whole, or a Weberian *a priori* foundation in individual subjective reason)[12] and yet under the defining circumstances of modernity is in a sense impossible, that the "holy" construal of the middle remains inevitable, though deluded. If the undeceived can, for her, still nonetheless remains realistically hopeful of some relative repair (and she sometimes appears to speak in such terms) then it is still not clear what historical-ontological grounds she has left open to legitimate even such a meagre possibility[13].

On this analysis, one would be tempted to suppose that Gillian Rose espoused not just a Hegelian view concerning the end of history, but a particular gloomy version of this thesis. The erosion of the middle is bound to continue, with the middle taking more and more ideological forms that both disguise and enable the further anarchic unleashing of private power, and the further concomitant aggregation of centralised control. The only serious and responsible resistance to this process must be to understand it and to suffer it, and to mourn and so redeem in mere imagination its continued ravages. A counter-community of the genuinely mournful would then seem to be the minimum possibility of actual and fully authentic resistance.

There is nothing trivial about this strictly Hegelian vision and it can today appear to be all too terribly true. Can it be in any way called into question? I think it can, but here there is only space to given the briefest possible indications of how to do so.

First, one needs most obviously to question the Hegelian assumption that the real is the rational and the rational real, which renders the modern deconstruction of the middle an

[12] See Rose (1981) in general.

[13] Her dialectical/speculative apparatus will not really allow a Burkean analogical mediation between relative goods and so the relative progressive improvement of this mediation that still falls always short of utopia.

ineluctable revelation of being. Rose ascribes to this assumption by refusing Adorno's reduction of the speculative to the dialectical or to a negative dialectics, which, like a negative theology simply unravels and surpasses all the contradictorily insufficient, in order finally to let the "constellation" of the eschatologically real positively appear in its own light of alterity[14]. Rose correctly says that this is not Hegel and it is to Hegel that she cleaves, for whom reality itself is subject to, and equally performs a negatively logical unravelling with rational sufficiency[15].

Yet, as against Hegel and Rose the real may, after all, be more than a material residue of a formally ineluctable logic, which is to reduce it to our categories, or to the echo of their breakdown. Instead, it may be the deposit of a united providential reasoning and willing that altogether transcends us, and into which we can enjoy but faint insight. In which case it may in theory be nonetheless possible for a social order remotely to mediate in fused fact and value supra-human cosmic circumstances. Equivalently the lapses, failures and coercions of history may be, as for Hannah Arendt, whom Rose purports to transcend, the marks of our relative failure of vision and our consequent privation of the real, and not, instead, complete univocal instances of the fully real, which we must then account for either by a theodicy or else by a material determinism applied to human history – neither of which seem to be rationally warranted. Rather, the pre-modern metaphysical perspective upon divine government[16] seems to allow perceived being to run with the grain of our intuitive sense of contingency: that disaster need not have happened, evil not have been committed, with even death not admitting of any decisive explanation any more than the instance of life which it terminates.[17] Without this perspective, then, indeed, freedom

[14] See Adorno (1973) and Rose (1978).
[15] See Rose (1981), pp. 204-220.
[16] For the best summation, see Thomas Aquinas, ST I, qq. 103-109.
[17] See Pickstock (2013), pp. 109-126.

and causation are rent away from each other in perhaps the *ur*-diremption, with the instance of freedom only being referable to the ultimate subjective return to the empty, null and nullifying power which for Hegel stands at the divine origin[18].

In any case there is an ambivalence about the grounding that Hegel gives to his speculative truth, as Luc Ferry and others have pointed out[19]. The end of history is already here, in the middle of the historical process, but just for that reason it determines all of the current process, including those irrational human perspectives which try to deny it. How, then, can the philosophical subject within the process already know the end: is it indeed that it has already in essence arrived with the modern state? But Hegel will not quite say this, in which case the anticipation of the end becomes sheerly theoretical rather than practical, and this theoretical knowledge that the real is the rational, and the middle already the termination, sinks to the level of an *a priori* certainty, not born of any historical upshot, of a kind which Hegel supposedly refuses. Therefore, short of a dogmatic claim to achieved finality in time that he never quite makes, Hegel cannot establish his speculative truth of the coincidence of the real with the rational and the finite with the infinite without also prescinding from this coincidence by grounding it in pure ideality. And this must of course rest on a mere decision.

Secondly, Gillian Rose, in her final writings and already in the final chapter of *The Broken Middle*, tended to oppose the postmodern either as trivial play, or as an impossible attempt to escape the political falsely traduced as "totality', or yet again as an attempt to have the ethical without the political, conceived either as a deluded utopianism, or the bad faith of a consoling fantasy. [20] In doing so, she was arguably in danger of downplaying (though by no means ignoring) the more

[18] For a reading of Hegel as – either theologically or atheistically – nihilist, see Milbank, J. (2009).

[19] See Ferry (1990), pp. 85-129; Ferry (1992), pp. 105-170.

[20] Se Rose (1991) and Rose (1992).

fundamental hollow laughter of the postmodern, or its more essential claim as to unsurmountable *aporias* which imply (as with the later Derrida) a merely regulative imperative to reform or revolution which can never in reality or even in coherent concept be approached, not even to any degree.

Yet she also diagnosed the postmodern vaunting of difference as in reality a dialectic between univocal unity and erratic difference so extreme as always to issue in a theoretical and practical nihilism [21]. For this outlook, every insertion of difference collapses back into the same, which once more is exhausted by its assertion of difference, with a kind of extreme Buddhist sense of illusion at either pole. Equally Rose excoriated the Heideggerean cult of death as the cancellation of all life and aspiration. Yet we have already seen that the transcendental horizon of death remained for her the non-ethical pre-condition of the ethical as both pagan and heroic, and equally (as today in the case of Žižek), her accurate exposition of Hegel appears uncannily close to the very nihilism that she refuses [22]. And as with Žižek it would also seem that an uncritical appropriation of exploded psychoanalytic nostrums (however semioticised and ontologised) serves to give existential support to the view that desire is always destined to be frustrated, that we mourn an origin that was never present in the first place and so forth[23]. In either case, the postmodern is given a chastened, tragic and less jocular gloss: but postmodern impossibilism, the new opium of the intellectuals, is thereby reinforced, not abandoned. It remains the case that adult emancipation is now to be able to see that we were never really children, although of course the children cannot be told this (and herein lies our current *aporia* concerning the fear and actuality of the abuse of children). It is equally to see that we can never really grow up, nor be fulfilled, but only die, but nevertheless face up to this and go on attempting the ethically impossible, in

[21] See Rose (1991).
[22] See Žižek (2009).
[23] See Rose (1992), pp. 85-112; Rose (1997).

submission, after all, to a Kantian and Fichtean regulative horizon, assumed without warrant, *a priori*. For today we believe neither in a first innocence, nor a later return of innocence as teleological fulfilment through, beyond and despite experience.

In political terms this Hegelian variant on hopelessness suggests that capitalism – as part of the revealed sphere of dirempted civil society – can never be overcome, either in terms of state imposition or of the recovery of a genuine corporate mediation of the economic. We must rather be resigned, not just to reformist social democracy, but even to the ever-diminishing possible success of such a reform. But just how, in that case, would one prevent Hegelianism being the name for our current all-prevailing hopeless liberal decency?

In this sense it may become apparent that Hegelian speculation, early and late, simply articulates one set of contingent western historical circumstances as inevitable. Gillian Rose rightly says that Marx did not adequately think the cultural conditions of capitalism, since these concern the *separation* of the material and the ideal, or of the materialised and the abstract, and not simply the presentation of material processes as lived illusion[24]. Yet Rose, after Hegel, merely baptises these preconditions as part of a providential process or as arising from being itself[25]. An alternative construal, after Marcel Mauss and Karl Polanyi, (and today Alain Caillé and Luigino Bruni), would rather see this separation as the attempted undoing of the symbolic, or the tie of thing to meaning as "gift", which constitutes every human culture without exception[26].

[24] See Rose (1981), pp. 214-220; Rose (1992), pp. 241-246.

[25] The first thinker of capitalism (though he did not use that term) as primarily an abstraction of the ideal from the material and so as a system of *destruction* rather than a (liberal, optimistic) 'system of production', inherently lead by financial speculation rather than manufacture, may have been Edmund Burke. See the brilliant remarks of J.G.A. Pocock towards the end of his essay *The political economy of Burke's analysis of the French Revolution* (Pocock, 1985).

[26] See, for example, Caillé (2007).

This observation can then serve to strengthen the strongest point of Rose's analysis, which is that we cannot abandon mediation, but can at best live out of its brokenness. For the middle is also symbolic exchange, or the reciprocal, spiralling transfer of meaningful things which are thereby gifts. Here the particular circumscribing thing is always signed with the not fully realised totality which it in turn constitutes. Or to put it another way, we cannot live without meaning, and yet the ultimate referral of meaning, its completeness which meaning requires, yet cannot realise, can only be assumed and believed in. For this reason, every social and political order is religious (and religion concomitantly the ultimate *explanans*, not the *explanandum*) and the problem with modernity is precisely that it attempts the impossible – to live without religion, without the middle, without the symbolic. As Rose saw, it has to live out of the ruins of this sundering, such that its meaning is now unmeaning, and even this is a religion. Yet as she also saw, though failed to admit that she saw, such a circumstance involves an asymptotic slide into a nihilism that, in practical terms becomes ever more unlivable, ever more criminal and anarchic, terroristic and torturing.

Given this analysis, it seems fair to say that one cannot read the refusal of feudalism as the refusal of just one stage in history, much less as its inevitable dialectical supercession. Instead, just as in reality there was no such thing as "feudalism" – an early modern backwards projection of contractualist thinking[27] – but rather a hierarchised mode of Gift-Exchange (that was much more voluntary and intermittent than usually supposed), so also the refusal of feudalism is the refusal of any symbolic, mediated and reciprocal order throughout human history and not just "in the middle age". And these orders have sometimes been highly participatory, egalitarian and democratic.

To match this point concerning the premodern, one could also argue, after Bruno Latour and many others, that it is not so much that the modern middle is always broken, but that we

[27] See Reynolds (1996).

much exaggerate our modernity, such that its substantive functioning has gone on depending on the relative independence of corporate bodies and corporate virtue – on trades, on schools, on churches, on professional associations, on localities, which all perpetuate the more integral middle of the middle ages themselves.

One can then finally link both points to the ethnocentric foreshortening of Hegel's historical vision, which his own contemporaries like Friedrich Schlegel had already started to overcome. A substantive middle is not an inevitable mark of the past and a formal, broken middle an inevitable mark of the modern. For outside the west, most of human history has consisted in the interaction between closed tribal exchanges on the one hand and imperial, tributary societies on the other. The irruption in the middle of corporations, as also with the case of strongly independent cities, city-states and the medieval civilisation of the countryside through a town economy, are all in the main peculiarities of western history and still more of Christian, which is to say of Church history. Above all, ecclesiology is not adequately considered by Hegel, any more than his perspective is seriously able to account for Rabbinic Judaism or the Islamic *Umma*. None of these charismatic irruptions into history can be reductively explained without failing to give a sufficient account of their phenomenological surprise. Thus it is just the primacy of the religious over the political and so the potential lurking, if problematic excess of the social to the political order that is linked to the thematics of habit and repetition in Kierkegaard, Ravaisson and Péguy. The primal constitution of the historical event is via an ungrounded and non-identical repetition and not at all by negation. For the latter, whether as opposition, refusal or erosion can only be parasitic on the event as such, and the material event as such cannot exist save through its own uncaused but half-anticipated and co-original spiritual celebration in a spirit of fidelity. It is true that Rose successfully reduced the Deleuzian account of

repetition to dialectics[28], but that is only possible because Deleuze had already suppressed the originally positive, analogical account of repetition in Kierkegaard and Péguy, which today both Latour and Badiou rework in their own way and in conscious dependence on the author of *Clio* – surely the greatest reflection on the nature of historical process that has ever been written[29].

In practical, lived terms, the idea of the end of history (which quite clearly Gillian Rose in effect ascribed to) might today seem plausible were it not for the irruption of Islamic discontent, protest and violence. For this reminds us that there exist other civilisations with other logics, for which there is no clear civilly social outside the political, and no clear political outside the religious. In this way we are driven to see how the disclosures of our western history are not the disclosures of an immanent being, whatever else they may disclose, besides ourselves to ourselves. Thus that the *acme* of *naïveté* is not, as Rose implies, failing to realise the conjoined modern universality of the nation-state and civil society, has been revealed to us by our incessant British, French and American assumption that just this order must inevitably be the future of the Near East.

In the fourth and final place, one can question Rose's placing of an amoral and violent politics before the ethical, in terms of both its consequent reduction after all of the ethical to deontology and its dogmatic materialisation, after all, of the "paraethical". By the paraethical, which perhaps appears only "para" for our modern ethical outlook, I mean all those circumstances that hover uneasily within and yet outside our moral control. These include, in an interesting variety: the question of lifetime vocation, of tragic dilemma, of the choosing of friends, of loyalty, of honour (or the appearing to be good – as necessary to the realisation of the good as justice being seen to be done is to justice), of melancholia, of groundless anxiety and finally of illness and even, in a certain sense, death. They

[28] See Rose (1991), pp. 87-108.
[29] See Péguy (1932).

also concern our ethical need, yet in "suspension of the ethical" to accept the partial good that has resulted from our own and others' bad decisions, as itself the working of Providence, if, in Augustinian terms, only the positive can really "occur". It was for this reason that Eckhart hyperbolically declared that one should not repent of past misdeeds – for to remain only in the (albeit necessary) moment of repentance becomes a kind of blasphemy[30].

On Rose's account, all these things tend to be rightly stressed, but in the name of existential, psychological or political supplementary prologues to the ethical and not as curious parts of the ethical substance itself. In that manner they are dangerously and in fact irrationally handed over to nature or to politics and familial processes at their most wilful.

By contrast, an ancient and medieval ethics of virtue included them not just at its margins, but often at its paradoxical heart – as Kierkegaard realised, in linking the "aesthetic" character of Greek ethics as para-ethics to issues of sin and redemption "beyond" the ethical, in any narrow deontological sense[31]. Here, as in the case of symbolic mediation, it has to be admitted that such an ethics, which involves a substantive hierarchy of goods, has sometimes characterised arbitrarily hierarchic societies, yet at times also quite other formations, as with the medieval orders of mendicants. For virtue ethics, the barely chosen matters of vocation and habit may be the most overridingly moral factors; likewise factors of "moral luck" such as circumstance, chance encounter and suitable friends; likewise again honour both as the appearing to be good and the gracious bestowing of a "treating as good" whether by God or by human others. Thus both Augustine and Aquinas (contrary to what the textbooks indicate), rated honour above virtue, still higher than the rank it had

[30] See Flasch (1992), p. 100.

[31] See Kierkegaard (1980), pp. 16-19. Kierkegaard is misread here if one imagines that he is simply dismissing Greek ethics as not yet properly ethical. To the contrary, he is suggesting a linkage between aestheticised ethics and ethics fulfilled, as the ethical but beyond the ethical in the religious.

enjoyed for the pagans, precisely because of the newly social and supernaturally-derived character of virtue as charity[32]. In a similar fashion, though loyalty may seem to a Kantian more affective than duty-bound, the necessarily personal and limited character of always mediated good meant that for Dante the disloyal were in the lowest circle of the *Inferno* along with Judas, while Aquinas insisted against the early scholastic avatars of ethical formalism that no wife should betray her criminal husband to the police. In all these instances there is something given, something that arrives not quite in our control that is yet nearer the heart of our very character and so our ethical substance than what does lie in our command. Of course the Bible yet more profoundly grasps this reality by speaking of "grace".

But something similar is found in a negative register: it is not exactly wrong to worry or fear – it is an affliction. Nor, by the same token to mourn or to miss. Nor again to try to aim at some goal that turns out to be beyond you. And yet the most penetrating theologians have seen in anxiety concerning our relation to the infinite the root of all defensive fear and so sin; in *accidie* the source of a corrosive lethargy and indifference; in over-reaching the sin of pride – a cosmopolitical sin which for Christian tradition is the first sin, the sin of Satan against divine government itself: the consequent ambiguity of Satan as tragic hero-villain being so well grasped by John Milton. In all these cases it would appear that one suffers misfortune as much as one commits a sin – yet this bad moral luck seems to be just what renders these sins "original" and the most serious: likely to degenerate further into bad habits and be the occasions for other wrong. Just the same consideration of course applies supremely to "the tragic". A great deal and perhaps the worst of human evil seems as much tragic as culpable. But to politicise or historicise this after Hegel or Rose is, at this point, to lose its ambivalence,

[32] See Milbank (2013), pp. 220-238; Milbank (2008).

for all the talk of diremption. Not indeed, as often said, to smooth away the instance of the tragic, but just the opposite: to anaesthetize it by rendering it ontological, rooted in nature, history or political necessity. And yet to say this is not over-simplistically to say that tragedy arises in a fallen world that is the result of sin. Instead, as the other instances of the negatively paraethical already listed indicate, it may rather be that from the very origin the committal of sin is also the irruption of the tragic: like evil contingent and privated, not rationally necessitated, and yet like evil again and precisely because tragic, inexplicable[33].

Perhaps the most acute instance of the tragic concerns what St Paul diagnosed as the co-linkage of sin and death. For the precondition of the possibility of evil is the infliction of death as violence. Conversely, the necessity of morality as reactive law is to do with the warding-off of death. Beyond this duality, Paul suggests a transvalued ethic of life that presupposes, somewhat like neoplatonism, only the fontal good and its repetition, originally and then by participatory degrees. Death remains, and therefore so also the law and reactive morality, as does the political state – but put in their place and at last given a positive goal, not one of mere warding-off. Certainly such a new, positive, and only self-presupposing ethic (commanding the good in such a fashion that, ideally, only the good need be presupposed) still requires or yet more requires ordering and government, the polity of the Church and even the State for the architectonic organisation of our bodies and nature, as affirmed by Aquinas after Aristotle. But any persisting coercion here, within a contingently damaged world, serves reconciliation and not just defence. Gillian Rose correctly exploded two centuries of Jewish Kantianism by insisting that Rabbinic Judaism had also been a political order, yet she debatably insisted that such Judaism must, in modernity, be captured, beyond any real possibility of inhabiting a legal enclave by a publicly dominant Christian and post-Christian law, whose own post-Reformation

[33] This perhaps accords with the perspective of Rowan Williams on tragedy.

degeneration into a pagan and Old Testament reactivity, assuming the worldly intransigence of sin, is not by Rose diagnosed [34]. And just as, after Hegel, she did not see the primacy of the liturgical as positively and non-diremptively fusing the ideal with the material (essentially an insight of Catholic, ethnographically-aware philosophy of history, from Vico through Christopher Dawson to Mary Douglas), so she did not see the primacy of gift-exchanging pre-law over the law in the social process. Nor that Christianity is a kind of concrete universalisation of these "primitive" and universal circumstances. In all these instances her commitment to the primacy of the political over the religious prevents her from considering the plausible view that legality is secondary to sociality if the most fundamental norms of the latter are religious before they are political.

One this primacy of the religious is occluded, then the paraethical, besides the symbolic to which it cleaves, becomes alien to us. For religions are exactly the liturgically-centred organisations which allow us to recognise and integrate into our lives what is not us and yet most of all us all of the time. Much of the symbolic and the sacramental attribution of meaning to extra-human *things* is precisely about this process, a way of after all negotiating the seemingly non-negotiable and yet bizarrely most intimate: our biology, our history, our moods, our "stolen goods" that result from our sins that we remain stuck with, for good as well as ill.

This is the realm that Kierkegaard termed «the religious beyond the ethical», although by that he certainly meant the hidden depth of the ethical as *Soedelighed* (*Sittlichkeit* – as *Fear and Trembling* makes clear) itself, an ethical not sundered from history and yet not necessitated by it in terms of the pre-ethical, as for Hegel, since history is seen as a providential process[35]. And to say providential is to say conceived in such a way that, as for Plato and Aristotle and yet more for Philo and Christianity,

[34] See Rose (1993).

[35] See Milbank (1997); Pickstock (2013), pp. 85-107 and 127-150.

the order of generated being has itself become politicised in a new identity of metaphysics with divine government. To refuse this fusion is instead to renarrate the pagan cosmic anarchic excess of being over order as the doomed "lapse" of the *Logos* into dark unmeaning, the Gnostic dramatic fantasy resumed and deepened by Jacob Boehme and then taken over by Schelling and Hegel[36].

And without religion, or the primacy of religion as beginning, middle and end, the paraethical must sink into the arms of the political, gnostically restored to the pagan preface of violence, as with Machiavelli. Which means into the arms of the technicians and the manipulators, the false liturgists of a supposed pure artifice controlling a supposed pure nature. But this is not inevitable diremption. It is merely our modern western fantasy of the separation of nature from culture, or denial, that we are, by nature, a cultural and so symbol-using animal. Gillian Rose goes along with just this fantasy in *Mourning Becomes the Law* by explicitly celebrating Thucydides, the ancient proto-Hobbes, as merely the other side of Plato, as though the latter were an idealist, rather than a realist proclaimer of participation in the transcendent[37]. Such a trajectory is the inevitable upshot of any immanentism and any immanentising of God as historical process or death, including the death of Christ, and the final setting free of bare negative liberty in all its randomness and mere aspiration to integration.

By contrast, the strange thing is that the ordinary truth that we are by nature cultural and so by nature meaning-giving and thereby meaningful (in default of a reduction of culture to illusion) seems to require the rainbow arch of transcendence as hovering over both culture and nature. Without this arch they cannot be integrated, and the ineffaceable truth of their conjuncture must be the continuous slide into further disintegration. It is just the baddest infinite imaginable.

[36] See Milbank (2009).
[37] See Rose (1997), p. 9.

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Abstract
The English Hegelian philosopher Gillian Rose attempted a remarkable critique of postmodern and poststructuralist thought, aiming to eschew its celebration of nothingness and death and promotion of an impossibilist ethic, removed from all the circumstances of historical actuality. By contrast to unsituated critiques of all law and governance in the name of aleatory difference and liberty, she insisted on the legal and political framing of all human thought and association. However, the very rigour of her analysis tends to reveal, as in the case of Žižek who was eventually influenced by her, that Hegel's immanent and all-inclusive rationalist horizon is itself nihilistic, suggesting the ultimate proximity of the modern and the postmodern. Rose rightly argued that without 'middle' institutions of civil society, integrating personal with political flourishing, there can be no social nor political order. Yet she also contented that the very emancipatory basis of modern society “dirempts” the personal from the political and the ethical from the legal. The middle has to remain, yet it is now ineluctably broken. Thus latent within her thought, but not fully admitted is the argument that any dialectical attempt to extend enlightenment by healing it through a restoration of the

middle will also offend enlightenment in seeking to return to the premodern or “feudal”. Hence attempts at reform that Rose herself would seem to half-endorse can only give rise to ersatz 'holy middles' which are themselves ethically estranged from law. Their promotion can only land up reinforcing diremption after all. Thus Rose's 'modernism' looks postmodern after all -- change towards justice becomes aporetic and impossible; attempts to mend must further break apart. To go beyond this one must first point out that not all positive, analogical mediations in human history have been “feudal”. Second that the primacy of the [political ignores the even greater primacy of the religious, that is able to integrate the ethical with the “paraethical” -- with circumstances but half-chosen by us -- in a way that does not see this realm as simply violent and outside the ethical, a Machiavellian assumption endorsed by Rose and which is the final basis of her claim for the non-surpassability of diremption. Today the only hope for surpassing political nihilism is a religious reinsertion of the mediating power of corporate bodies, able to relate personal finality to shared human purposes in time.

Keywords: Nihilism, Gillian Rose, Žižek, Hegel, Political Nihilism